

Why Would Anyone Let Their Employer Stick A Microchip Into Their Body?

A majority of employees at Three Square Market, a Wisconsin tech company, have agreed to let it install microchips in their hands, despite the controversy.



[Photo: Flickr user Bennett]

BY [STEVEN MELENDEZ](#) 5 MINUTE READ

If your employer asked your permission to install a microchip in your body, what would you say?

That’s the question facing workers at Three Square Market, a Wisconsin company whose self-checkout technology [powers more than 2,000 miniature convenience stores in offices and break rooms around the world](#). Since the news broke last week, the company has come under fire from the public, and it’s barely managed to stay above a [one-star rating on Google](#).

The chips, RFID-compatible devices roughly the size of a grain of rice and typically injected between the thumb and forefinger, are strictly voluntary, the company says. About 50 out of 80 employees in the River Falls, Wisconsin, headquarters have opted in, as have the company’s college interns. They’ll be able to use the chips to unlock doors around the office, log in to computers and copy machines, and, naturally, make purchases at the in-office minimart.

“Now, instead of remembering hundreds of passwords, we’ll be able to hold our hand over an RFID reader,” says CEO Todd Westby.

Three Square is working with Swedish company [Biohax International](#) to install the chips and is paying the roughly \$300 parts-and-labor cost for employees who want them. Those who want the benefits of the chip without breaking their skin can opt to have it installed in a wearable ring or bracelet, says Westby. Other employees are free to stick to passwords and traditional badges to access computers and unlock doors.

“The people who don’t want to be chipped are understandable,” he says. “This is a voluntary thing.”

Software engineer Jon Krusell says the company has been supportive of his decision to skip the implant and use a removable RFID ring instead.

“I like the technology—I just don’t like it in my body,” he tells *Fast Company*. “I know you can take out the microchip, they can pop it out, but I’d rather just take off a ring if I want to get rid of it.”

Still, the project has naturally stirred up plenty of concern that it’s the first step on a slippery slope to a dystopian future, and that similar chips will one day be necessary to do business, receive government services, or board a plane. Comments on the company’s Facebook page reference the Bible’s Book of Revelation, and its prophecy that only those with the “mark of the beast” will be able to buy or sell goods, and some are calling for a boycott of Three Square and its related companies. Parent company [TW Vending](#) is also the parent of Turnkey Solutions, which offers similar kiosks for use as automated prison commissaries, which has further unnerved some critics of the proposal. But general manager Dewey Wahlin says the company has no plans in the works to deploy the chips in prisons or jails.

Other critics have expressed concern about the health ramifications of having such chips inside the body, and warned that Three Square or third parties will be able to use the devices to spy on the microchipped workers. (Westby emphasizes that the chips don’t contain any GPS technology, so they won’t be able to monitor their employees’ movements other than their interactions with devices in the office.)

Melissa Timmins, sales director at Three Square, says she’s still unsure whether to have the chip implanted.

“It’s something that’s being implanted into my body,” she says. “I’m just a little nervous about that.”

Timmins’s 18-year-old daughter, who asked that her name not be used, doesn’t share those concerns. She says she’s planning to get a chip of her own, adding that she hopes to be able to use the device for payment at more stores in the future, in lieu of services like Apple Pay, believing that it will be more secure from the threat of hacking. She says she trusts the simple chip more than a complex, network-connected device like a smartphone.

She also looks forward to the simplicity of paying with the palm of her hand, she says.

“Most stores at, like, the Mall of America accept Apple Pay, and I think that’s pretty cool that you can just put your hand down [to pay],” she says.

Three Square isn’t the first company to offer digital implants to its employees: A little over a decade ago, a Cincinnati-based surveillance system provider called [CityWatcher.com](#) made the [news](#) by embedding similar chips into a handful of employees. In response, a number of states—including [Wisconsin](#), where Three Square is based—passed laws saying employers can’t require the chips.

In Europe, a number of companies have offered chips under similar voluntary conditions. [New Fusion](#), a Belgium-based digital marketing company, recently implanted chips in about a dozen employees. Managing director Vince Nys says the project to install chips and corresponding readers, a boon to employees who forget their key cards, was along the lines of a Google-style 20% time project, voluntarily undertaken by tech-curious workers.

“If you should force someone into doing this, that should be really wrong,” he says. “It’s more a personal thing than a company thing.”

And Westby says Three Square first learned of the concept when installing its vending kiosks at [Epicenter](#), a Stockholm coworking space, which made headlines earlier this year by offering chips to employees and members for use in unlocking rooms, activating printers, and other tasks.

“When we were setting up the markets, Biohax approached us and said, ‘Are you aware that we are a microchip company that can actually facilitate payment through your kiosks?’” says Westby. “We all looked at each other and said, ‘That’s interesting.’”

At Epicenter, too, the chips are strictly voluntary, says Epicenter CEO and Cofounder Patrick Mesterton.

“There’s no sort of group pressure to do anything,” he says.

Generally, the chips have proven more popular in workplaces outside the United States, where people are less worried about government or corporate tracking, says Amal Graafstra, author of the book *RFID Toys* and founder of biohacking supply company [Dangerous Things](#). The company supplies chips to [hobbyists](#), who install them to access doors in their homes, start their cars, or even share business card data with compatible phones. But so far, the market for more serious uses in the U.S. appears limited. In 2004, a company called VeriChip [won Food and Drug Administration approval](#) for an implantable chip that would be used to help doctors access medical record information. But the company withdrew the controversial devices from the market just a few years later, [citing lack of interest](#). VeriChip’s successor company declined to comment.

Laws in some states prevent companies from offering incentives to get the chips implanted, which some companies interpret as meaning that they can’t pay for the devices in employees who want them. And others are worried about a potential consumer backlash, he says.

“If one person says, ‘We’re not going to buy your product because you’re chipping employees,’ they’re not going to do it,” Graafstra says.

In other countries, the public reaction can be just the opposite, he says.

“In Denmark or Sweden, the company goes, ‘We could offer implants to employees, people are going to talk about us, they’re going to talk about how innovative we are,’” says Graafstra. “There’s no financial benefit to offering chips to employees—it’s just coverage. It’s just corporate image.”