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Implanting Chips into Your Body Is a Dangerous Step

by PHILIP H. DEVOE *July 26, 2017 1:03 PM*

@PHILIPDEVOE

Wisconsin company Three Square Market has begun offering microchip installation in its employees' hands to grant them keyless access to the building and cash- and card-less payment for food in the cafeteria. Fifty of the company's 80 employees agreed to participate in the program and, on August 1, will be the proud owners of a rice-sized radio-frequency identification (RFID) chip embedded between their thumb and forefinger. While some employees were eager to participate, others had doubts:

> "It was pretty much 100 percent yes right from the get-go for me," said Sam Bengtson, a software engineer. "In the next five to 10 years, this is going to be something that isn't scoffed at so much, or is more normal. So I like to jump on the bandwagon with these kind of things early, just to say that I have it."
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> Jon Krusell, another software engineer, and Melissa Timmins, the company's sales director, were more hesitant. Mr. Krusell, who said he was excited about the technology but leery of an implanted device, might get a ring with a chip instead.
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> "Because it's new, I don't know enough about it yet," Ms. Timmins said. "I'm a little nervous about implanting something into my body."
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> Still, "I think it's pretty exciting to be part of something new like this," she said. "I know down the road, it's going to be the next big thing, and we're on the cutting edge of it."

Though it isn't clear yet, the program seems to function as a test to see if Three Square can incorporate the technology into their products — self-serve canteens for businesses, offering a simple and efficient way of purchasing food and drinks in the workplace. Microchips would enhance the experience the company's mini-markets boast, and, as Timmins said, represent cutting-edge technology.

But does the fact that it's cutting-edge make it inherently good, especially when it poses such an evident threat to privacy? Three Square downplays the threat in their official statement:

> As with a proximity card, the chip implant works in a similar fashion — by holding the chip up to the device reader, the unique serial number associates the user with the software, the software then performs the requested function . . .
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> The chip is not trackable and only contains information you choose to associate with it. This chip does not have GPS capabilities.
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> RFID readers are proximity readers and can only be read with a few inches of an appropriate device . . .
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> The data on the chip is encrypted, like the technology used in credit card[s].

In May 2016, Popular Science published an article meant to downplay the dangers of a chip implant:

> The most common question I get about the implant (aside from "why would you do that?") is whether I'm being tracked. The short answer is no. RFID chips aren't that powerful. Think again of your office keycard: If you've ever had trouble getting it to work through a bag or wallet, you know that these chips aren't good at transmitting through anything, let alone over long distances. My chip certainly can't talk to a satellite.

But in April, the first company to offer RFID chip installation, Epicenter, revealed more functions than Popular Science and Three Square suggested:

> "It's an implant in the hand that enables [employees] to digitize professional information and communicate with devices both personal and within Epicenter. Once 'chipped' with this technology, members can interact with the building with a simple swipe of the hand. Chips can also be programmed to hold contact information and talk to smartphone apps," [Co-founder and Chief Executive of Epicenter Patrick Mesterton] said.

And, from the *L.A. Times*:

> And as with most new technologies, [the Epicenter chip] raises security and privacy issues. Although the chips are biologically safe, the data they generate can show how often employees come to work or what they buy. Unlike company swipe cards or smartphones, which can generate the same data, people cannot easily separate themselves from the chips.

Tripping over ourselves to accommodate devices that might save time and cut back on daily inconvenience is becoming commonplace today, but chip installation is a dangerous step in the fight for security in the modern world. Should governments utilize the technology to "simplify" the transmission or storage of federal information, they may close the door on true privacy.

Rogue governments installing chips in their citizens is a common theme in dystopian fiction — *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Total Recall*, for example — and the procedure is rarely as "risk-free" as the installer promises, ending poorly for the protagonists. Of course, movies and television shows aren't pillars of argumentative fact, but there's a reason the theme works.

We have been conditioned to approach technology with eager anticipation ever since the Industrial Revolution gave us more time outside of work to enjoy what we earned while in it, but it's dangerous to believe new technology is good only on the basis that it makes life more convenient. We should be hesitant when third parties tap into our private life, and especially so when that wiretap is under our skin.