

Microchip implants for employees? One U.S. company says yes

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Jowan Osterlund, of Biohax Sweden, holds a microchip implant, which its Wisconsin partner is offering to workers. (James Brooks/AP)

On Aug. 1, employees at Wisconsin tech company Three Square Market can get a chip the size of a grain of rice injected between their thumb and index finger. It will allow them to swipe into the office building and pay for food in the cafeteria with the wave of a hand.

By [MAGGIE ASTOR](#)

The New York Times

At first blush, it sounds like the talk of a conspiracy theorist: a company implanting microchips under employees’ skin. But it’s not a conspiracy, and employees are lining up for the opportunity.

Once that is done, any task involving radio-frequency identification technology — swiping into the office building, paying for food in the cafeteria — can be accomplished with a wave of the hand.

The program is not mandatory, but as of Monday, more than 50 out of 80 employees at Three Square’s headquarters in River Falls, Wisconsin, had volunteered.

Jon Krusell, another software engineer, was more hesitant. Excited about the technology but leery of an implanted device, he said he might get a ring with a chip instead.

The program — a partnership between Three Square Market and the Swedish company Biohax International — is believed to be the first of its kind in the United States, but [it has already been done at a Swedish company, Epicenter](#). It raises a variety of questions, both privacy- and health-related.

“Companies often claim that these chips are secure and encrypted,” said Alessandro Acquisti, a professor of information technology and public policy at Carnegie Mellon University’s Heinz College. But “encrypted” is “a pretty vague term,” he said, “which could include anything from a truly secure product to something that is easily hackable.”

Another potential problem, Acquisti said, is that technology designed for one purpose may later be used for another. A microchip implanted today to allow for easy building access and payments could, in theory, be used later in more invasive ways: to track the length of employees’ bathroom or lunch breaks, for instance, without their consent or even their knowledge.

“Once they are implanted, it’s very hard to predict or stop a future widening of their usage,” Acquisti said.

Todd Westby, chief executive of Three Square, emphasized that the chip’s capabilities were limited. “All it is, is an RFID chip reader,” he said. “It’s not a GPS tracking device. It’s a passive device and can only give data when data’s requested.”

“Nobody can track you with it,” Westby added. “Your cellphone does 100 times more reporting of data than does an RFID chip.”

Health concerns are more difficult to assess. Implantable radio-frequency transponder systems, the technical name for the chips, were approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2004 for medical uses. But in rare cases, according to the FDA, the implantation site may become infected, or the chip may migrate elsewhere in the body.

Dewey Wahlin, general manager of Three Square, emphasized that the chips are FDA-approved and removable. “I’m going to have it implanted in me, and I don’t see any concerns,” he said.

While that sentiment is not universal at Three Square, the response among employees was mostly positive.

“Much to my surprise, when we had our initial meeting to ask if this was something we wanted to look at doing, it was an overwhelming majority of people that said yes,” Westby said, noting that he had expected more reluctance. “It exceeded my expectations. Friends, they want to be chipped. My whole family is being chipped — my two sons, my wife and myself.”

If the devices are going to be introduced anywhere, Wahlin noted, employees like Three Square’s might be most receptive.

“We are a technology company, when all is said and done, and they’re excited about it,” he said. “They see this as the future.”