

Three Square Market offers to microchip its employees

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Photo: James Brooks / James Brooks / Associated Press



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Jowan Osterlund of Biohax International holds a microchip. Three Square Market in Wisconsin is offering to implant the chips in employees' hands.

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.

On Aug. 1, employees at Three Square Market, a technology company in Wisconsin, can choose to have a chip the size of a grain of rice injected between their thumb and index finger. 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, Wis., had volunteered.

The program — a partnership between Three Square Market and 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.

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."

Health concerns are more difficult to assess. Implantable radio-frequency transponder systems 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.

Maggie Astor is a New York Times writer.