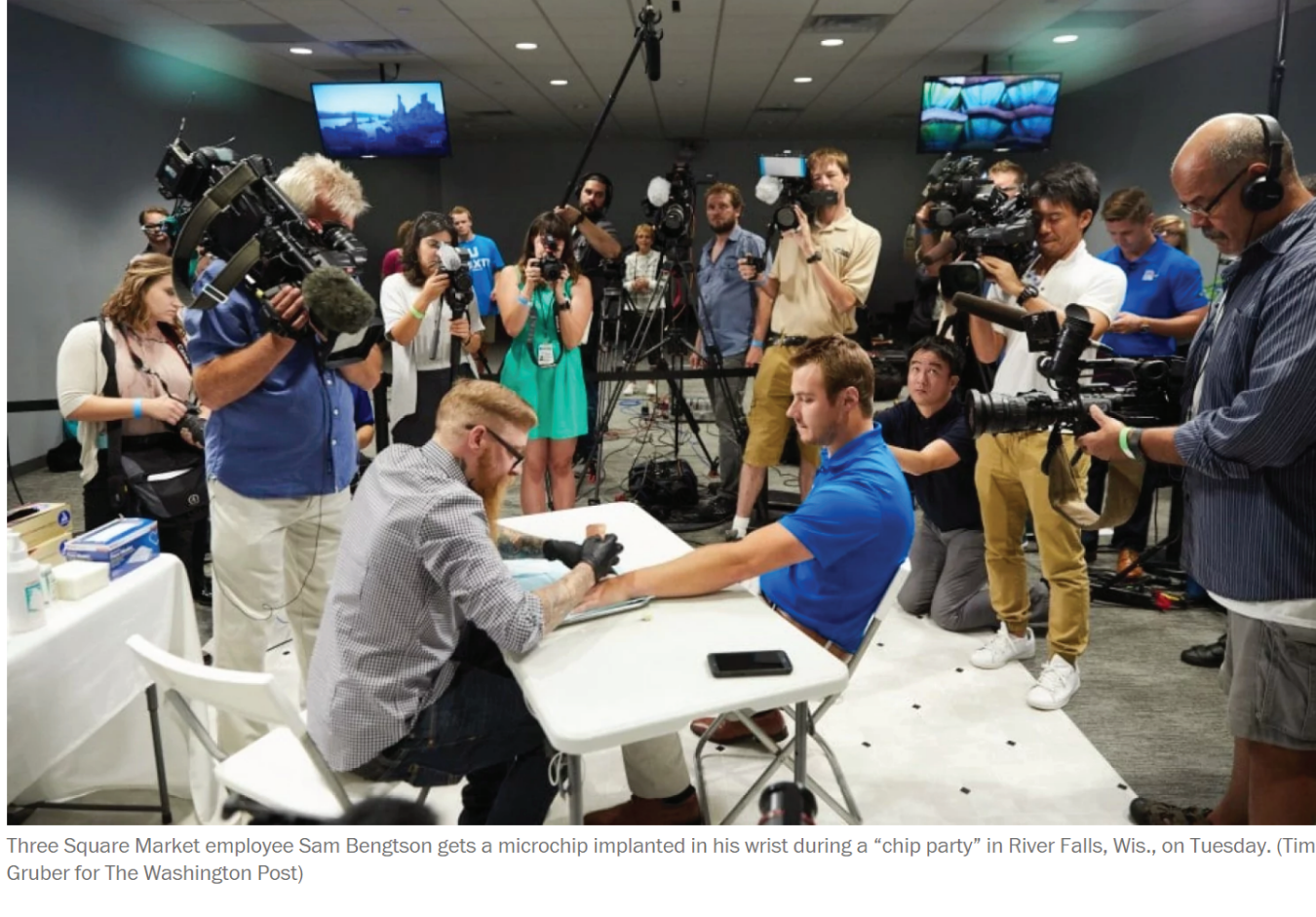


Some feared hackers and the devil. Others got microchipped.

By **Danielle Paquette** August 1



Three Square Market employee Sam Bengtson gets a microchip implanted in his wrist during a “chip party” in River Falls, Wis., on Tuesday. (Tim Gruber for The Washington Post)

RIVER FALLS, Wis. — The bearded body piercer with tattooed forearms tells Sam Bengtson to take a deep breath, and then he plunges in the needle, implanting a microchip into the software engineer's hand.

“That was nothing,” Bengtson says, as the piercer smooths a bandage onto his skin.

The radio-frequency identification tag now lodged between his index finger and thumb will allow Bengtson to open doors and log onto his computer at work with a wave.

His employer paid for the device, which costs about \$300, and threw a “chip party” for employees at its headquarters Tuesday, handing out blue T-shirts that say: “I got chipped.”

[Do I let my employer microchip me?]

About 50 employees agreed to be implanted with the devices.

Three Square Market, which designs software for vending machine, hopes to soon launch a global microchip-reader business, marketing the technology to other firms.

But first they have to conquer reservations about the devices.

Patrick McMullan, the chief operating officer, said he and another executive learned about Biohax, the Swedish start-up that produces the implants, about six months ago during a business trip to Europe.

The microchips are about as big as a grain of rice, and enable the wearer to perform various tasks such as entering a building or making a payment.

The company already uses similar proximity readers in its vending machines. Shoppers can tap a credit card and walk away with a soda.

With microchips, McMullan said, the company could take their products to the next level of convenience — and beyond the vending industry.



The tiny microchip is filmed by a member of the media. (Tim Gruber for The Washington Post)

“If we’re going to work on this, we need to know how it works,” he said. “I can’t go research technology that we’re not willing to use ourselves.”

As of now, implants are practically useless in the United States. But Three Square Market is betting that will soon change. People in Sweden can already use the chips as [train tickets](#), the company said.

Bengtson, the engineer, said he doesn’t feel like a guinea pig. His information is encrypted, he said, which means it’s more secure in his hand than on, say, a cellphone.

He plans to build an application that will enable him to start his Toyota Tundra with a touch. If the program works, he said, the company could sell it.

“I want to have that in about a week,” he said with a grin.

Microchips aren’t new. Pets and livestock are tagged. Deliveries, too. Chips that pierce human skin, however, have a history of fizzling out on American soil.

Technology analysts fear the chips could ease the way for hackers. Some churchgoers say the devices violate their religious beliefs.

Stapled on a tree outside the company’s lot was a flyer that said: *WARNING* Microchipping employees.

Sixteen years ago, Applied Digital Solutions, a company in Delray Beach, Fla., introduced a microchip called VeriChip that could be implanted in human arms to store medical records.

Doctors said at the time that they hoped to trace a patient’s history with a hand scanner — a useful ability, the company asserted, if someone is unconscious or confused.



A reporter gets a microchip embedded under her skin during Three Market Square’s “chip party” on Tuesday. (Tim Gruber for The Washington Post)

But while VeriChip won approval from the Food and Drug Administration in 2004, the device never caught on with consumers. Some people expressed privacy concerns: Could they be tracked?

By 2008, the company stopped making the device, citing [low sales](#).

However, VeriChip motivated states to consider the legal quandaries a future with microchips could present.

After the device hit the market, Wisconsin outlawed mandatory implants.

Marlin Schneider, the former state representative who introduced the measure, said in 2005 that he wanted to get ahead of employers requiring workers to get chipped, or prisons forcing inmates to do the same.

“Eventually, people will find reasons why everyone should have these chips implanted,” Schneider [told reporters at the time](#).

California, Missouri, North Dakota and Oklahoma also banned tagging without consent, with lawmakers asserting the chips could lead to serious privacy breaches, such as covert monitoring.

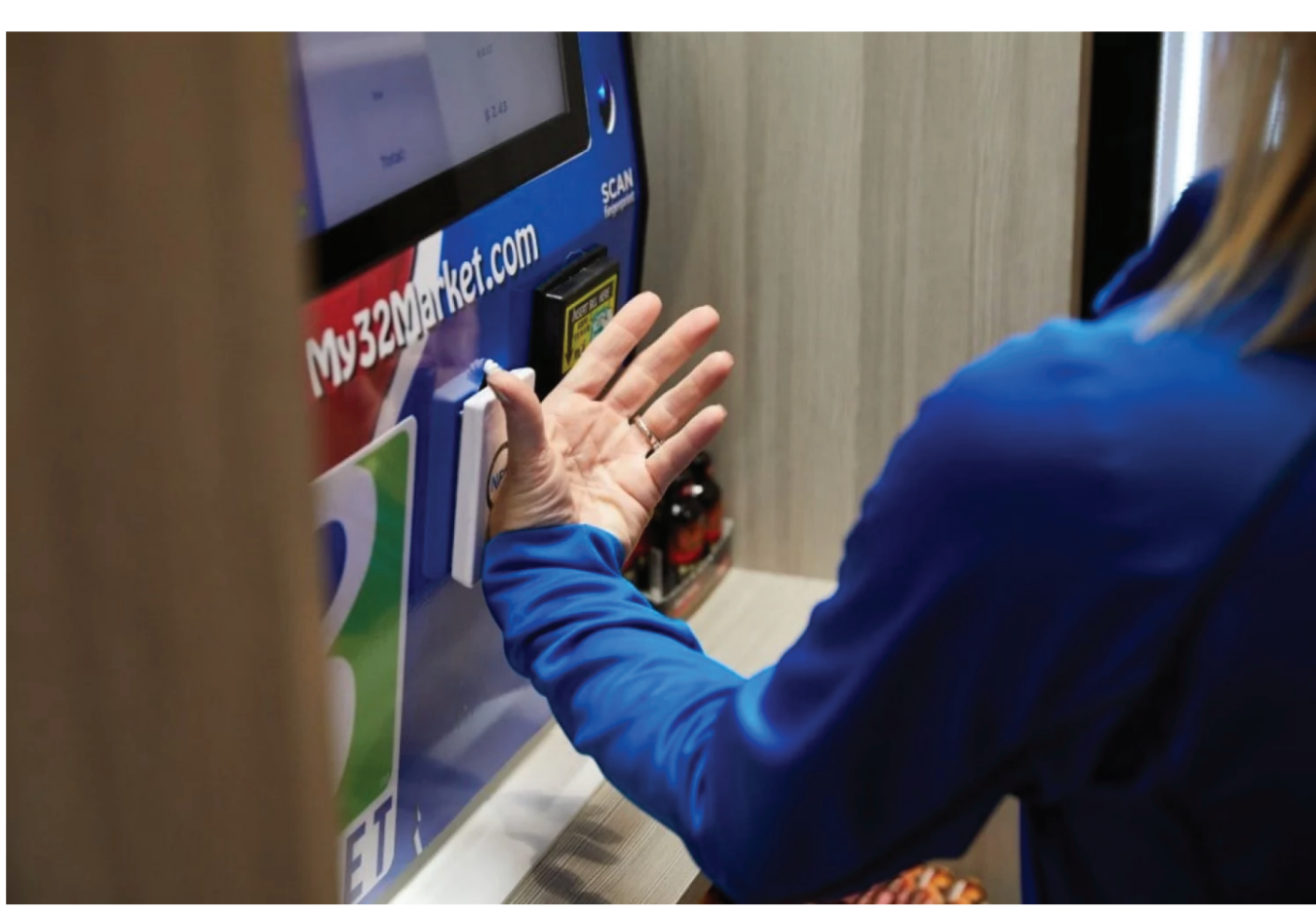
Michael Zimmer, a professor of information studies at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, said it’s hard to predict how hackers could evolve to exploit seemingly impenetrable devices.

“Often what appears to be simple technologies,” he said, “shift into becoming infrastructures of surveillance used for purposes far beyond what was originally intended.”

Workers have resisted similar technology because of their religious beliefs.

Two years ago, a coal miner in West Virginia, backed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, [won a discrimination case](#) in federal court after his employer mandated a hand scanner to clock in.

The coal miner said he was forced to retire after declining to use the scanner, which he believed was the “mark of the beast” — a sign of evil and the “end times,” discussed in the Bible, that is said to appear on the right hand. He was awarded \$150,000 in damages.



A Three Market Square employee demonstrates how her microchip allows her to buy a drink. (Tim Gruber for The Washington Post)

Cordarrel Lyrek, 28, feels the same way about Three Market Square’s microchips.

The Minneapolis resident, who makes T-shirts for a living, said he made the 45-minute drive Monday to River Falls to hang protest posters on trees and business windows. A Christian, he put his phone number on the flier, hoping people would call to talk about God.

“It says in the Bible that’s a sign of the beast,” Lyrek said. “But it’s not only about that. It’s about invading people’s privacy.”

McMullan, the Three Square Market executive, wondered if protesters would storm the company’s property during the chip party. Dozens of people had commented “boycott” on their Facebook page.

But none came Tuesday. Under a clear sky, the campus was quiet. Outside the window were stretches of green, cornfields and a Lutheran church that resembles a red barn.

At the nearby dairy farm, Jason Kjos, 51, was feeding his chickens as a yellow cat watched.

He was raised Catholic and heard about the company’s plans on the news. Kjos didn’t care about it. Automation had made his life easier. Maybe microchips would help his neighbors.

“It’s technology,” he said. “Technology moves at the speed of light. Whatever we think is crazy or impossible is either already happening or in development.”