



SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY

Wisconsin Company Offers to Voluntarily Microchip Employees

Nick Blumberg | July 27, 2017 6:21 pm

Buying a bag of chips or logging onto your computer with a wave of your hand will soon be possible at one Wisconsin company. The manufacturing firm's new, voluntary program offers employees a chance to have a tiny microchip implanted between their thumb and index finger for free.

The company, Three Square Market, specializes in what it calls "micro markets" – better known as break rooms and cafeterias. It says the chips can take the place of keycards and passwords, and be used to buy items in the cafeteria. They stress that all the employee data will be protected, and that there's no GPS tracking.

So, is it brilliant or a little too Big Brother? And what are the benefits and risks for employer and employee?

"We foresee the use of RFID technology to drive everything from making purchases in our office break room market, opening doors, use of copy machines, logging into our office computers, unlocking phones, sharing business cards, storing medical/health information, and used as payment at other RFID terminals," said Three Square Market Todd Westby in a [press release](#). "Eventually, this technology will become standardized allowing you to use this as your passport, public transit, all purchasing opportunities, etc."

"One of the biggest things that came to my mind initially was the word trust," said Carol Semrad, who heads the human resources consulting firm C. Semrad & Associates and is past president of the Chicago Society of Human Resources Management. "In order to be in a position as an employer to even ask employees to undergo this kind of endeavor, you really have to have set up a culture with a high level of trust, which I think is pretty difficult, because what you're asking is for somebody to put something foreign into their body."

While the Wisconsin program is voluntary, Semrad still thinks it poses risks. "There certainly could be a level of coercion, either from supervisors, the owners of the company, or other team members to try to coerce people to do something that perhaps they're not comfortable with ... (which) invites something that as an employer, you don't have to do to yourself."

Jim Speta, a professor of law at Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law, also points out that an employer could expand the scope of data it collects. "Right now, they've got them on the doors and at the cafeteria. Well, maybe they'll say, let's put one in the break room and see how much time people spend in the break room, or near the bathroom so they can tell how many times you go to the bathroom."

From a legal perspective, Speta says there isn't much that applies to a situation like this as long as the employee gives their consent to be microchipped. And, while the idea might seem strange to some, microchips can help save money on lost keycards and make purchases convenient for the employee.

Speta also points out that, by carrying a cell phone in our pocket almost everywhere we go, we can be tracked without any implanted microchips.

"Not only the cell company can track us. If we have WiFi turned on on our phone, we're sending out a number unique to our phone called a MAC address. Any building we walk into can pick up that address," Speta said. "It seems a little different, of course, because it's being injected into our bodies, but to me it's the next step in the phenomenon of tracking people through their things."

Semrad and Speta join Chicago Tonight for a conversation.