

Cyber staff: Wisconsin company offers to microchip employees

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In this March 14, 2017, file photo, Jowan Osterlund from Biohax Sweden, holds a small microchip implant, similar to those implanted into workers at the Epicenter digital innovation business center during a party at the co-working space in central Stockholm. Three Square Market in River Falls, Wis., is partnering with Sweden's BioHax International, offering to microchip its employees, enabling them to open doors, log onto their computers and purchase break room snacks with a simple swipe of the hand. More than 50 employees are voluntarily getting implants Aug. 1 at what the company is calling a "chip party" at its River Falls headquarters. (AP Photo/James Brooks, File)

A Wisconsin company is offering to microchip its employees, enabling them to open doors, log onto their computers and purchase break room snacks with a simple swipe of the hand.

Three Square Market, also known as 32M, said more than 50 employees are voluntarily getting implants Aug. 1 at what the company is calling a "chip party" at its River Falls headquarters. The chips are the size of a grain of rice and are inserted underneath the skin between the thumb and forefinger using a syringe. The procedure takes a couple of seconds.

The technology is already available in Europe but company leaders say this is its first appearance in the U.S. They hope the \$300 microchips can eventually be used on more than just snack machines—everything from air travel, public transit and storing medical information.

"We want to be on the forefront of this. This is something's that's coming," said Curt Giles, president at 32M, which operates 2,000 self-checkout kiosks for companies in 20 countries. The company is partnering with Sweden's BioHax International, where employees have been using the implants. Three Square Market is paying for the employees' microchips.

While the technology has raised privacy concerns because of the potential to track a person's whereabouts and purchases, officials at 32M said the data in the microchip is encrypted and does not use GPS. But a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee said he worries about the potential for "function creep," where the stated purpose of a technology ends up spilling over into other uses, including surveillance.

"This is one of those technologies that sound like it might create some kind of efficiency, but to me the downside is just too great," said Michael Zimmer, who teaches internet ethics and privacy at the college's School of Information Studies.

Zimmer said what 32M is trying to achieve can be done through less invasive means, like with an iPhone app.

"Part of my general concern is that we don't go too fast and that we understand the implications of these sorts of (technologies), which is why it's good we're having this conversation," he said.

Giles and other company executives say they're having microchips implanted themselves next week but understand employees who don't want to do it. About 85 people work at 32M.

"We have employees who have said, 'I just don't want to do it.' And we 100 percent respect that," said Tony Danna, vice president of international development. Danna said the microchips can be easily removed in seconds, "just as if you were taking a sliver out of your finger."

The company is using the microchips in-house for now but other organizations have expressed interest in recent days, including a hospital chain, said Patrick McMullan, chief operating officer. He said he could not reveal the names of those who have expressed interest.

"We need to be responsible with this. This is not something you can do fast," McMullan said. "It has to be done right. You have to proceed slowly."

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