

Companies seek Chip Implants to Control Staff

The Sunday Times (of London) BIG BROTHER could soon be watching from the inside. Several international companies are consulting scientists on ways of developing microchip implants for their workers to measure their timekeeping and whereabouts.

The technology, which has been proven on pets and human volunteers, would enable firms to track staff all around a building or complex. The data could enable them to draw up estimates of workers' efficiency and productivity.

Professor Kevin Warwick of Reading University, a leading cybernetics expert, has been approached by several firms including a leading software company with a British subsidiary and Blackbaud Inc, the American software giant.

Warwick hit the headlines last summer when he had a silicon chip transponder surgically implanted in his forearm. He was subsequently able to show how a computer could monitor every move he made using detectors that were scattered around the building in which he worked.

In his experiment, Warwick showed how the system could also benefit workers by programming it to switch on lights, computers and heating systems as he entered a room - and turning them off when he left.

The technology is likely to have a strong appeal to companies with high labour costs, for which small increases in staff productivity can have a big impact on profits. It is also relatively cheap - just a few pounds for each person, according to Warwick.

"For a business the potential is obvious," he said. "You can tell when people clock into work and when they leave the building. You would know at all times exactly where they were and who they were with."

Warwick admits that people will be "shocked" by the idea of companies asking their employees to have such implants. He said: "It is pushing at the limits of what society will accept but it is not such a big deal. Many employees already carry swipecards. I think this is just a step on from that."

His research follows earlier experiments by companies such as the telecommunications firm AT&T that showed how smart cards carried by staff could be programmed to relay a worker's position back to a central computer. AT&T Laboratories in Cambridge has been working on its "smart badges" for two years. They use ultrasound to tell the main computer exactly where the wearer is, allowing their desktop computers and phone calls to "follow" them around the building.

The company has, however, stopped short of suggesting staff should have devices inserted into their bodies.

The first practical application of such technology is, however, not in humans but in pets. Under the government's new "passports for pets" scheme, which replaces the quarantine system from 2001, dogs will have a microchip implanted beneath their skin to identify who they belong to.

Representatives from police forces in Britain and the United States have also expressed interest in the implant technology, according to Warwick.

He believes that submitting to an implant could be made a condition, for example, of being granted a gun licence.

In other words, the more you comply with Big Brother, such as having a chip in your brains, the more you allowed to take part in society. Now, what society would you like to be in ? ...