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For Immediate Release

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Chipping People

What is the probability of personal chip implants entering the mainstream consumer market?

Washington, DC, November 12, 2007—Technology has advanced to the point where it is technologically feasible to implant advanced microchips in humans, explains analyst Matthew Sollenberger in a recently released brief—part of a series on "wildcard" events by the futurist research and consulting firm Social Technologies.

"GPS, medical implant technology, and radio frequency identification (RFID) chips could be used for a variety of functions, from surveillance to identification," Sollenberger says. "Chipping people would be simple, and could assist with child and elder safety, debit and credit payment, and personal medical records. But consumer opinion is sharply divided on the merits of human microchip implants."

Drivers

- Cheap implantable devices and quick, low-cost implantation have made chipping easy and affordable. It takes about 20 minutes, and doesn't require stitches.
- Chip tracking and scanning is reliable, thanks to wireless, GPS, and RFID scanning networks.
- Parents are increasingly looking to technology to provide child safety solutions. In fact, 75% of parents in the UK say they would buy a child tracking device.

Obstacles

- The idea of implanting a chip with tracking functions in the body tends to evoke strong feelings—especially considering that RFID implants are considered highly vulnerable to hacking, and the long-term health effects are unknown.
- Privacy advocates warn that human chipping would let "Big Brother" run rampant.
- Consumer and legislative moves to restrict the use of human RFID implants are already in motion, and several states already have laws prohibiting implantation of chips.

Business implications

"Ubiquitous RFID implants could reshape many aspects of consumer society, for instance by enabling new ways to personalize advertising and shopping," Sollenberger suggests. "Kids could have implants that inform vendors of parentally approved purchases, and personalized health implants could help consumers choose what foods to eat."

It's quite possible that a culture of constant monitoring could actually increase demand for new security products, he offers. "As consumers become accustomed to continuous tracking and expect to be able to monitor their valuables—from cars to children—they may begin to insist that everything be trackable."

Additionally, the spread of human chipping and support networks could provide the groundwork for a major expansion of location-based services (LBS), such as marketing for new location-based games, targeting reward programs to a consumer's location, or optimizing the flow of fast-moving consumer goods based on aggregate consumer-implant data.

What's the probability of human chipping coming to fruition? "The necessary technology is essentially in place—the outcome will hinge on what users want. There is at least a low probability of chipping becoming widespread within 10 years," Sollenberger concludes.

Learn more

To further discuss the technology and implications of human chipping, set up an interview with futurist Matthew Sollenberger by sending an email to Hope Gibbs (hope.gibbs@socialtechnologies.com).

Matthew Sollenberger) Futurist

Matthew Sollenberger joined the research team at Social Technologies in the spring of 2007. Previously he worked as a research analyst at The Arlington Institute (TAI), a futurist consultancy in Northern Virginia, where he focused on the Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning Project for an Asian government and engaged in Middle East conflict modeling, systems thinking, and morphological analysis. Also at TAI, he co-authored a paper on the implications of wildcards for long-term US national security, published in the Fall 2006 issue of *National Strategy Forum Review*. A 2005 graduate of Swarthmore College's political science program—with high honors and a minor in peace and conflict studies—Matthew brings to the job a passion for global issues. While in college he was a research assistant at the World Policy Institute, working on its Counter-Terrorism Project and collaborating on a paper, "Prisons and the Education of Terrorists," that was published in the Fall 2004 issue of *World Policy Journal.* **Areas of expertise**: Foreign policy, technology.

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