

Posted 8/30/2004 12:16 AM

Computer chips in uniforms: tracking inventory or wearers?

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — A uniform-supply company says it uses microchips to better track the garments, but privacy watchdogs are concerned the tiny electronic devices also could be used to track the people wearing the clothing.

Grantex is a pioneer in the field of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), sewing microchips into the uniforms it rents to clients including Steelcase Inc. and General Motors Corp.

Grantex uses the low-frequency "smart tags" to automatically track and sort its thousands of uniforms. After the chips are programmed, a computer scans the garment to tally how many times it has been laundered or if it needs to be mended or undergo special cleaning.

Company president Douglas Singer said he and vice president Gordon Reynolds looked into RFID and determined it would cut down on sorting time, improve efficiency and capacity, and reduce labor costs.

"With this you get better quality. In turn, you get a better reputation," Singer told The Grand Rapids Press for a recent story. "We built this company on reputation and referrals."

The chips cannot keep track of garments or their wearers away from Grantex's sorting facility in the Grand Rapids suburb of Wyoming, Singer said. Still, the company had to persuade skeptics who had removed the microchips from their uniforms that the quarter-sized tags did not threaten their privacy.

"The first thing people thought we were doing is following and monitoring them by satellite," Reynolds said. "Really, only one or two people out of thousands were concerned."

Those concerns are not ill-founded, say privacy advocates who fear that companies could use the tags to track customer movements and buying habits and that law enforcement agencies could use the technology to monitor citizens.

"It's things that people are actually spending real money to do already," said Katherine Albrecht, founder and director of C.A.S.P.I.A.N., a consumer-advocacy group focusing on privacy issues. "It is just about as worrisome as having a tracking beacon in your flesh, because you are required by your employer to wear (a microchipped uniform), and you can't get away from them."

At the least, companies should tell their employees about how RFID is being used, Albrecht said.

The technology was developed years ago and is used to make computerized cards to enter buildings, parking lots and ramps. Smaller, cheaper versions have led to more large-scale uses.

"It's going to take time for its acceptance, but it's one of the fastest growing technologies in the U.S. today, and it's going to get to the point when it's exponential," said Herb Markman, chief executive of Positek RFID. The Norristown, Pa., company sells RFID systems to companies like Grantex.

Contributing: Information from The Grand Rapids Press

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