
DEC founder Ken Olsen: Obituaries, reminiscences and video

Posted by Scott Kirsner

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By Scott Kirsner, Globe Columnist

Ken Olsen, the legendary founder of Digital Equipment Corporation, died on Sunday at age 84. Olsen made computers more affordable for businesses, and more accessible to programmers, and Digital was the largest and most successful technology company New England has ever seen. With 140,000 employees at its peak, and operations in 95 countries, it was the second biggest tech company in the world, after IBM. With an initial \$70,000 investment from the Boston venture capital firm American Research & Development, Digital was also regarded as the very first VC-backed "home run."

- Boston Globe obituary: "Mr. Olsen launched Digital in 1957 in a defunct woolen mill in Maynard with \$70,000 in venture capital. For a time, Mr. Olsen, his partner, Harlan Anderson, and his brother Stanley Olsen were the company's only employees. With innovation after innovation, Mr. Olsen and Digital helped create the computer industry. At one point, the company was valued at about \$14 billion."

"...Adjusting for inflation, Fortune [Magazine] said, Digital was bigger than Ford Motor Co. at the death of its founder, Henry Ford, and also larger than US Steel when Andrew Carnegie sold his company or Standard Oil when John D. Rockefeller stepped aside."

- New York Times obituary, written by Glenn Rifkin (who also co-wrote a biography of Olsen, "The Ultimate Entrepreneur"):

In a tribute to him in 2006, Bill Gates, the Microsoft co-founder, called Mr. Olsen "one of the true pioneers of computing," adding, "He was also a major influence on my life."

Mr. Gates traced his interest in software to his first use of a DEC computer as a 13-year-old. He and Microsoft's other founder, Paul Allen, created their first personal computer software on a DEC PDP-10 computer.

In the 1960s, Digital built small, powerful and elegantly designed "minicomputers," which formed the basis of a lucrative new segment of the computer marketplace. Though hardly "mini" by today's standards, the computer became a favorite alternative to the giant, multimillion-dollar mainframe computers sold by I.B.M. to large corporate customers.

- Gordon College's "About Ken Olsen" page (Olsen was a long-time trustee and supporter of the Christian college, in Wenham)

- Gordon College also produced this video, "The Legacy of Ken Olsen," which includes reminiscences from several former DEC employees:

- WBUR obituary, from tech reporter Curt Nickisch

- Photos from a Ken Olsen tribute held at Gordon College in 2006

- Olsen's profile in the National Inventor's Hall of Fame

- James Connolly of Mass High Tech reminisces about a long-ago Ken Olsen photo shoot at the Mill in Maynard.

- The Digital Alumni Bulletin Board

- Video: Commemorating 40 years of Digital
