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## Digital Equipment Corp. Founder Ken Olsen Dead At 84

BY STEVEN BURKE ▸

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Joanne Jacobs, a former Digital employee, informed friends of Olsen's passing in an email that was also sent to Digital Alumni and DecConnections alumni organizations.

"Ken had been in ill health for the last few months and was in hospice care," wrote Jacobs.

"Rest in peace, Ken, and thank you for all the contributions you have made to our world, and for enriching all of our lives," wrote Ava Schutzman, a 21 year Digital veteran on DecConnections.org.

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Olsen, who earned his bachelors and masters degrees in electrical engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), founded DEC in 1957 in a converted wool mill in Maynard, Mass., and built it into what was by 1988 the second largest computer company in the world behind IBM with \$11.5 billion in sales and more than 121,000 employees worldwide.

Digital thrived by building a new class of computer - the minicomputer - which ushered in the era of distributed network computing - that challenged mainframe computing power IBM and led to the office automation computing boom.

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Digital introduced what was called the world's first "small" computer in 1960 and five years later introduced first mass produced minicomputer. The minicomputer, which was ridiculed by mainframe power IBM, made DEC a Fortune 500 company by 1974.

Olsen, who made the Route 128 belt in Boston the Silicon Valley of the Northeast in 1970s, brought computer networking to businesses of all sizes by espousing Ethernet as a networking standard. Long before the PC revolution, Digital, under Olsen's leadership, pioneered computer networking, electronic mail and even instant

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one time he did not see the need for a personal computer in the home and later claimed that consumers would get tired of managing personal computers.

Digital announced its first quarterly loss in 1990 and over the next seven years cut its workforce in half. Olsen stepped aside as CEO in 1992 and Digital was swallowed up by PC giant Compaq Computer Corp. in 1998 for \$9.15 billion.

Schutzman recalled Olsen as an entrepreneur with a heart of gold. "I consider myself very lucky for having spent so many years there," she said. "He meant an awful lot to an awful lot of people. He was a kind person and very brilliant man. Ken was always an inspiration to employees."

Schutzman recalls Olsen seeing her in the halls at Digital and asking her if she needed help carrying some "long range plans" she was bringing to an office. "He was just a kind man who really cared about his employees," she said. "You really had the opportunity to innovate and shine as an individual at Digital. You were always encouraged to propose new ideas."

Schutzman says Olsen always stressed the importance of employees doing the "right thing" acting in the best interest of customers. Indeed, Olsen refused to pay his salespeople commission because it may incent them to act in the "best interest of the salesperson rather than the customer," said Schutzman.

Win Hindle, a former Digital Equipment Corp. top executive and Olsen friend, in a 2008 DEC Connections celebration at the dedication of the Ken Olsen Science Center at Gordon College in Wenham, Mass., said Olsen's leadership genius was in melding his personal values into a set of principles and practices by which he led the company.

"He believed and often said that honesty was the bedrock of a person's values," said Hindle. "Being an engineer and admirer of the scientific method he knew that seeking the truth required a frank and open mind not colored by prejudice or preordained conclusions. And Ken was always looking for the truth in what he did."

Hindle also praised Olsen for his fierce integrity. "I have never known anyone who

Hindle said Olsen insisted on excellence pushing for the "best products, the best organization and the best people. He knew that top notch people were the backbone of a successful organization."

Hindle said that Olsen's insistence on "quality came before the objectives of profit and growth.

"Not many leaders in any industry would have stated their companies objectives in that way," said Hindle.

In her email to friends, Jacobs said that she expected a Memorial Service to "celebrate Ken's amazing life sometime in mid May at Gordon College." Olsen would have celebrated his 85th birthday on February 20th.



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