

DEC founder Kenneth Olsen mourned by computer industry

Olsen remembered as true industry pioneer, setting the stage for Gates, Jobs and others

By [Bob Brown](#), Network World
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Kenneth Olsen, the computer industry pioneer who co-founded and led minicomputer king Digital Equipment Corp. for 35 years, died at the age of 84 on Sunday in Indianapolis.

As DEC's leader, Olsen oversaw the company's [epic battles vs. IBM](#) and its mainframes for the hearts and business of IT shops – a fight DEC eventually lost as the era of fast, cheap and networked PCs took hold in the 1980s and 1990s. During its heyday, DEC was the second largest computer company in the world with \$14 billion in sales and its PDPs, VAXes and DECnet network technology became staples in many organizations.

Today's IT industry remains filled with companies whose founders once worked at DEC or with its gear. Digital was acquired in 1998 by Compaq for \$9.6 billion.

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Before DEC, Olsen worked at MIT on air defense technology and core memory that was a precursor to today's RAM. Even after years at DEC's helm, Olsen still said he considered himself a scientist first and an entrepreneur second.

Olsen's passing was mourned across the Web, including on sites maintained by DEC alumni such as the [Digital Alumni outfit](#) and the [DEC Connection](#).

Dan Bricklin, co-creator of the VisiCalc spreadsheet and DEC alum, tweeted: "Ken Olsen is in the elite club of tech founders w/Gates & Jobs, and set the stage for them. What he did we take for granted today."

Olsen's achievements have been recognized many times over. He was inducted into the Computer History Museum's Hall of Fellows in 1996 and also received a National Medal of Technology in 1993.

He was revered by other computer industry leaders.

"An inventor, scientist, and entrepreneur, Ken Olsen is one of the true pioneers of the computing industry," said Microsoft's [Bill Gates in a letter to Gordon College](#) of Wenham, Mass., in 2008 when the Ken Olsen Science Center was dedicated. "He was also a major influence in my life and his influence is still important at Microsoft through all the engineers who trained at Digital and have come here to make great software products."

Olsen's DEC co-founder, Harlan Anderson, [published a memoir in 2009](#) in which he said that "one of the things that was not uppermost in our mind [when starting Digital Equipment] was not going out and making lots of money." DEC's biggest contribution, he said, was bringing "man/machine interaction to the commercial world."

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Olsen served as president of the company from its founding in 1957 until his retirement in 1992. In 1960 DEC produced the PDP-1. DEC flourished with the PDP-8, the world's first

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mass-produced mini-computer, which was manufactured from 1965 to 1984. The PDP-11, produced by DEC in 1970, became the most popular minicomputer line in history.

Olsen left Digital in 1992, essentially forced out as young executives of the PC era usurped the authority of the generation that ushered in the minicomputer.

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By Anonymous on February 9, 2011, 11:06 am
I heard a story while at DEC (for almost 13 years) that he was pushing to create a field service/installation group. Apparently there was a lot of push back from...
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If you're not using 36

By Anon on February 9, 2011, 12:45 pm
If you're not using 36 bits.You're not playing with a full DEC IH %DECsystem-10 continued... RIP Ken.
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By Anonymous on February 9, 2011, 1:02 pm
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Page 2 of 2

Olsen was known to be a blunt speaker on occasion. As corporate IT spread beyond the confines of IS departments in the 1980s and 1990s, he could be critical of people who were not steeped in technology. "The whole world's gone crazy because all of the software and all of the marketing are run by people who've never operated a business," Olsen

said in an interview with the IDG News Service in 1998, six years after he left Digital.

He advocated a balanced approach to management, however. "The first problem is to try to get people to organize (businesses) with wisdom, with common sense," he said, in the 1998 interview.

Curriculum Vitae:

1926 - Born in Stratford, Connecticut, on February 20

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1944 - Entered the Navy

1950 - Graduated from MIT with a B.S. in electrical engineering

1952 - Awarded an M.A. in electrical engineering by MIT

1957 - Co-founded Digital Equipment Corp. (DEC)

1979 - Co-founded Boston's Computer Museum

1990 - Inducted into the National

Inventors Hall of Fame

1992 - Retired from his position as President of DEC

IDG News Service contributed to this report

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