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## **New England High-tech Legend Ken Olsen Dead at 84**

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(NECN: Peter Howe, Maynard, Mass.) It is no overstatement to say you couldn't imagine modern high-tech Massachusetts without Digital Equipment Corp., the company that technology visionary Ken Olsen, who died Sunday at 84, founded in 1957.

At its peak, Digital, which pioneered interactive "minicomputers" with names like PDP and VAX that liberated engineers, scientists, and office workers from being tied to far more expensive and inflexible punch-card mainframes, employed 120,000 people and had peak 1992 annual revenues of \$14 billion. It employed as many as 12,000 people in Massachusetts alone at its zenith, including hundreds at an old wool mill in the middle of Maynard, Mass., that came to be known as The Mill. Now known as ClockTower Place, the mill is just one of many signs of Ken Olsen's influence all over the landscape here -- not just iconic buildings, technology that still brings your computer and cellphone to life, and thousands and thousands of workers who will always proudly call themselves "DEC-ies" and maintain a vibrant alumni association. Olsen founded Digital with Harlan Anderson, a colleague from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Olsen earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering.

Ray Stata, the co-founder of Analog Devices in Norwood, who knew Olsen well, said, "The fortunes of Massachusetts and high tech were largely carried for many years by DEC." When he was starting his

company in 1965, it was the name "Digital Equipment" that inspired Stata and his partners to reach for a name as big and bold on the analog side of technology.

"DEC, in its prime, was able to hire absolutely the best and brightest from across the world," Stata said. "He was a man of incredible integrity. He was revered, respected, even loved by his employees."

In a rare television interview with NECN in 1992, Olsen talked about how, for him, it was so "satisfying to see people succeed, see them grow see them mature and learn."

Vanessa J. Fox, a sales executive at DEC from 1983 through 1998 who is now principal of Partners in Productivity in Arlington, Mass., said Digital workers really felt that from Olsen. "Respect, leadership -- he was always somebody that you felt was kind," Fox said. "People were given free rein, a lot of free rein, to do the kinds of things that they wanted to do. During the good years, it was just a place where really smart people got together and worked on projects, and they worked hard and played hard."

Fox said Olsen was known as, and insisted on being called, "Ken" by everyone at the company. One example of his egalitarianism: He let anyone, not just top executives, use the fabled corporate helicopter to travel from DEC facilities in Maynard, Marlborough, Mass., and Merrimack, N.H., to Logan International Airport. Fox recalled how early Digital was to develop and deploy technologies like e-mail and instant messaging, decades before they became office commonplaces.

Local



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And the equivalent of a coveted low-number license plate: Website [www.dec.com](http://www.dec.com) was just the fifth company website ever registered on the World Wide Web.

Notably, it was a Digital PDP-10 on which two young "computer nerds" named Bill Gates and Paul Allen created the first version of BASIC programming language for personal computers that helped unleash the personal-computing revolution and led to the creation of Microsoft Corp.

While Ken Olsen was right about many big things, one big thing he got wrong -- many would say, obstinately wrong: Just how big those PCs would become in the late 1980s and 1990s. He was notorious for having once said, "There is no reason for an individual to have a computer in his home" and predicting, "The PC will fall flat on its face in business." In effect, the personal computer wound up doing to Digital's minicomputer business what Digital's minicomputers had done to IBM's then-dominant mainframes in the 1960s and 1970s, and under Olsen, Digital resisted moving into PCs until, many say, it was far too late.

That was a big part of what sent Digital into a tailspin in the early 1990s that led to over 70,000 layoffs and Digital's ultimate 1998 sale to Compaq, now part of Hewlett Packard. (Today [www.dec.com](http://www.dec.com) still aims you to Hewlett Packard's home page.) Among the many big assets Digital sold off: The huge semiconductor plant in Hudson, Mass., now run by Intel Corp.

Despite Digital's demise, Olsen will be widely remembered as a man who sowed many fine seeds.

"One of the great legacies, not just here in Massachusetts but the country, is the number of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial people that graduated from DEC," Ray Stata said. "He hired very, very bright people. He turned them loose to do their thing. He developed entrepreneurs."

Agreed Vanessa Fox: "While the company doesn't still exist, lots of other companies exist as a result of Digital. I don't think Massachusetts would be the kind of technological powerhouse without Digital."

You can say Ken Olsen leaves a son, a daughter, five grandchildren ... and thousands and thousands of proud former Digital workers who continue to innovate and transform our area's economy to this day.

With videographer David Jacobs

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