

DEC's Olsen Remembered As Tech Pioneer By Former Employees

By [Steven Burke](#), CRN

Feb. 08, 2011 5:23 PM EST

Ken Olsen, the legendary [minicomputer](#) pioneer who passed away on Sunday at the age of 84, was remembered lovingly by former employees for his passion for "elegantly" engineered products and for the innovative culture that he created at Digital Equipment Corp.

Olsen co-founded Digital in 1957 in an old wool mill in Maynard, Mass. along with his brother Stanley and Harlan Anderson. Together, they pioneered mass-produced minicomputers in 1965 that drove [the office automation boom and computer networking explosion](#) in the seventies and eighties.

Former Digital employees said it was Olsen's passion for finely engineered products and commitment to engineering excellence that made Digital one of the most admired companies of the seventies and eighties.

Rod Sutherland, a 30-year Digital veteran who as a corporate ambassador traveled around the world 15 times espousing the Digital philosophy, said Olsen created an academic-like environment at Digital that attracted the best and brightest engineers from the likes of Carnegie Mellon, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Stanford. "Anyone that had anything to do with computer science wanted to work at DEC," he said.

Sutherland, who described himself as one of those "Mill Rats" that populated the halls of Digital's corporate headquarters in Maynard, Mass., said the Digital culture was an [extension](#) of the creative environment Olsen found as an electrical engineering graduate at MIT and then as a researcher at Lincoln Lab, an MIT research facility that did some of the early research on interactive computing.

"There was an academic environment in that wonderful old Mill," recalled Sutherland. "More than anything else it was a reflection and reiteration of MIT and Lincoln Lab. Ken just brought it forward one more notch. That is what attracted so many of the brightest and best engineers."

"Young people coming into the company saw a chance to do something important in an environment that felt comfortable to them," said Sutherland. "It was just like being back on campus. There were a lot of bright people throwing out new ideas. It was an absolute fireworks [display](#) every time three engineers would get together. They would have nine new ideas!"

In a speech honoring Olsen in 1978, Sutherland compared IBM (NYSE:[IBM](#)) Founder and CEO Tom Watson to Olsen. "In an interview for Business Week, Watson, then CEO of IBM, was asked "Do you have any hobbies?" His answer was... "Yes, I collect salesmen." If someone asked Ken if he had any hobbies (in addition to gardening) he could have said, "Yes...I collect engineers." And did he ever! -- some of the most creative that I have ever known!"

Olsen's battle cry to his engineering team was to create "elegant simplicity" in all of Digital's products.

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Gordon Bell, a Digital engineering legend who worked with Olsen on the early minicomputers, in an [e-mail](#) sent to colleagues recalled Olsen's sense of humor and disdain for the mass of cables that ran out of the backs of all computers. One Monday morning some 30 years ago Olsen left a poster on Bell's desk of a DecMate computer with ragged wires running out of the back of it with the cutline: "Marketing Or Engineering?"

"That illustrated Ken's sense of humor that most people never saw," wrote Bell in the e-mail. "This is something we shared, along with the concern about wanting to have beautiful computers and cabling. Unfortunately, I don't have the text on the back of the poster that listed 20 reasons for the messy cables e.g. engineering said marketing made me do it."

"Ken loved to work on the cabling and [power supply](#) problems for the DEC computers, a problem he and most every other company has never solved," wrote Bell. "He delivered a lot of the crisply burned out supplies that customers sent him to my office. Cabling has only gotten worse. However, as a Ford Board member, he claimed that he was able to get them to have beautiful engine compartment and cabling after he became a board member."

"Then there's the story of him wanting to redesign the famous, large, Yellow Ethernet [cable](#) just as we were to announce it!," continued Bell. "I tend to remember all the humor and moments of irony that we shared while building computers at DEC."

Peter Koch, a 25-year Digital veteran, former Digital manufacturing plant manager and publisher of the Digital Alumni newsletter, recalled Olsen bringing his top executive team to the Westminister, Mass. manufacturing facility with all of the components of a Digital computer spread out on the floor so the executive team could put a Digital computer together. "He wanted them to see how elegant and relatively simple it was to put our products together so when the executives called on a customer they had knowledge of how the products were put together," he said. "He was an engineer's engineer."

Often, Koch recalled before a meeting Olsen could be found on the ground tinkering with computer wiring or cabling. "He was very much into the products," Koch said. "He was always walking around the lab working with engineers. He was a busy man as CEO but he always had time for the engineers and employees."

Koch recalls that Olsen would sometimes helicopter into the Westminister, Mass. manufacturing facility to meet with manufacturing technicians putting products together to make sure that there were no issues with the products.

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Koch says it was the innovative culture and creative environment that Olsen created at Digital that still inspires tens of thousands of former Digital employees.

"Ken created an environment where we as young people were given incredible responsibility, an environment where it wasn't a sin to fail, where we were doing new stuff all the time, always on the cutting-edge," he said. "That was what Ken fostered. Everyone remembers that kind of feeling at Digital. We could do anything! The people that worked at Digital never had an experience like that anywhere else."

"Customers would scramble for Digital products because Ken was such a perfectionist," said Koch. That passion for quality extended to Digital's Rainbow personal computer, an elegantly engineered personal computer, remembers Koch, at a time when the market wanted PC compatible knock-offs.

Koch last saw Olsen at the dedication of the Ken Olsen Science Center at Gordon College in Wenham, Mass. in 2008. "His health was failing and he came and acknowledged the crowd (which included some 2,500 former Digital employees)," recalled Koch. "It brings tears to my eyes to think about it now. There was such an affection for that man. He cared for people. He really did understand how to motivate people. He wasn't a dictator. He encouraged free-thinking and trying new things."

Win Hindle, a 30-year Digital veteran and an Olsen friend, said part of Olsen's genius was creating a company where bright talented people wanted to work. "That was part of the reason for the success of the company," he said. "He created an atmosphere where clever, ingenious people wanted to work. It was very exciting!"

Hindle said that every time he was with Olsen he learned something new. "He always approached subjects in an unusual way," said Hindle. "He had a slightly different way of looking at the world than others did. If I had a problem and took it to him, he always had a solution he could help me with. I cherished the relationship we had."

Hindle said Olsen had a burning desire to "do well not just for himself but for the company. He communicated that very well and gave people lots of opportunity. People could create their own projects and if they proposed them and they were successful they were rewarded."

Hindle said he was attracted to Digital because of Olsen's "vision" for computing and by the success Olsen had building one of the first transistor-based computers. Hindle pointed out that Digital was profitable from its very first year in business with a line of digital logic modules that appealed to engineers. "They had good products that sold quickly," he said.