

NEWS

Digital Equipment Corp. co-founder Ken Olsen dies at age 84

Olsen pioneered the move from mainframes to minicomputers.

By IDG News Service staff

IDG News Service |

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Kenneth Olsen, the computer industry pioneer who co-founded minicomputer maker Digital Equipment Corp., died at the age of 84 on Sunday.

Olsen will be remembered for the key role he played in at least one technology revolution: the move from mainframes to minicomputers.

Olsen entered electronics school for a year during his time in the Navy. Working as a technician in the service, Olsen's knowledge and passion for electronics grew.

During his time at MIT after the Navy, Olsen designed the Whirlwind computer, the first real-time computer. Olsen was on the staff of the MIT Digital Computer Laboratory for seven years.

Outfitted with a \$70,000 investment from General Georges F. Doriot at the American Research and Development Corp., Olsen co-founded Digital Equipment Corp. (DEC) with fellow MIT graduate Harlan Anderson in Maynard, Massachusetts, in 1957. The company began to develop the first small interactive computer and producing printed circuit logic modules, which were used to test electronic equipment.

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 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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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.

Sharing his passion for computers with the public, Olsen co-founded the Computer Museum, originally located in Marlborough, Massachusetts, in 1979. The museum later moved to Boston. In 1999 the museum closed, but many of its exhibits are now part of the Boston Museum of Science.

Olsen has received many awards, including the MCI Communications Information Technology Leadership Award for Innovation, the Founder's Medal from the IEEE and the National Medal of Technology.

Curriculum Vitae:

- 1926 - Born in Stratford, Connecticut, on February 20**
- 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**

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