Richard Briggs Interview Access Summary

00:00:00 -> 00:05:30
Background of Richard Briggs, and the Path Chosen for him leading him to the DEC

Richard John Briggs was a former employee of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC), born in Aldershot, Hampshire, 24th of November, 1950. His dad was in the army. He led a nomadic childhood and attended 13 schools in Germany, the Far East, Libya, Malta and England. Eventually he was brought back to England to settle for his education. Richard attended a naval training school, then a year of normal school and took Maths and Physics in A-level. Despite the failed grades, he got on an apprenticeship with the Board of Trade[1] for two years. After completing the apprenticeship in Bletchley Park, he worked at the air traffic control tower at Heathrow under the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) (the National Air Traffic Services nowadays). This was where he came into the first encounter with PDP-8 which then was used as radio communication equipment for processing data from the dialects at various points on the runway.

Rejoining CAA after an unfulfilled ambition to be trained as a pilot at the Royal Air Force, he did further work on radio communication equipment installation. From this point, he developed a passion for software and programming so he applied to be transferred as a trainee programmer at the London Air Traffic Control Centre. There, he joined a brand new project involving PDP-11. What was seen as an alternative opportunity to most turned out to be a rewarding choice which shaped his lifelong career. He was a programmer for about two years and got sponsorship to study for a Higher National Certificate in Computer Studies at Reading Technical College. He was offered a job after a few applications at the brand new DEC headquarters at Imperial Way, Reading, a posh choice to many and a short commute to where he was living. He started from November 1981, stayed in the company and survived two takeovers by Compaq and Hewlett-Packard (HP), and eventually retired with a redundancy package at the end of 2011.

00:05:31 > 00:07:38
IBM versus DEC

[1] In 1966 the civil aviation functions of the Ministry of Aviation, including NATCS, were transferred to the Board of Trade, where a new Civil Aviation Department was set up. On the merger of the Board of Trade and the Ministry of Technology in 1970 to form the Department of Trade and Industry the new department took over all the Board of Trade's civil aviation functions. Most of these, which included NATCS, subsequently passed to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) which was set up in 1972. At the same time NATCS was re-named the National Air Traffic Services (NATS).

Richard reflected that in hindsight, he made the right choice to go into DEC which was at first not the most glamorous option to him being outside the industry at the time of 1978. He thought IBM was the place to be at that time, similar to the thought of most, ample of training opportunities in the United States, springboard to higher pay jobs etc. After he joined, DEC provided training opportunities for its employees by sponsoring them on studying an HNC at Reading to learn programming. He remembered FORTRAN was the programming language he learned and which he applied the knowledge on the job. He quantified the efficiency he achieved at the time - once he could figure out the correct codes he could get the result over lunch for a job the IBM counterparts, still working on remote punch cards, would need a week. This was the moment he realised he made the right decision. People from technical or sales background took pay cuts to join DEC. It was a highly regarded company like Apple or Google at the time.

00:07:39 > 00:10:49
DEC - Forever Young Culture

Richard started to learn about the DEC company on the ground, through the installation work of the maintenance engineers, who were all young. DEC maintained the youthful culture throughout his time with DEC, and he thought it was what kept everyone going. He took pleasure in working with different groups of young colleagues throughout his time with DEC, until retirement. This was a stark contrast to his brief time with CAA, which was a place where qualifications and seniority mattered. In DEC, at least as far as its UK subsidiary was concerned, there was no hierarchy as such and where trials and errors were celebrated rather than staying in status quo without making any mistakes.

00:10:50 > 00:17:00
First Role in DEC

Richard did not land a role at DEC straight on his first application. His expertise was on real time radio signals but the position he applied was on asynchronous signals for printers. It was a mismatch of skill sets at that time but he got on the reserved candidate list of DEC. Later on he received a call from DEC to check his interest in another role - maintainability engineer in the software engineering team, part of the corporate engineering team at the US Headquarters. His role was to support the maintenance of the new products designed and produced by the engineers. He was involved, for example, in the word processing, email decks of the communication software that were once used by Stephen Hawkings[2]. He sat in the group that was responsible for the maintainability of the products that were out of the

[2] Possibly **DECtalk** - a speech synthesiser and text-to-speech technology developed by Digital Equipment Corporation in 1983,[1] based largely on the work of Dennis Klatt at MIT, whose source-filter algorithm was variously known as KlattTalk or MITalk.

Reading DEC park. He gained exposure to new ideas and technologies through the various levels of specifications from business requirements, marketing requirements, feasibility study, technical design, functional specification, testing plans, sign-off documents etc. Although Richard did not have much active input to the programming part and the technical production, he would get his maintainability "hat" on, from the perspective of the customers without technical background, to look at details such as packaging, labels and languages, and he would sign off after considering these perspectives.

00:17:01 – 00:18:54
Moving on to the Next Role in Fear of Redundancies

Richard was in the maintainability engineer role for about three years. DEC's shift of approach in the maintenance of its product documentations in multi languages (it used to do for its VAX VMS and PDP lines) and the decision to maintain only at the site of the terminal engineers who were non-English speaking (e.g. in France, Germany etc.) for PCs in the late 80s led him to the thought of moving to another job within DEC. He was concerned that the group that he was part of would be affected by redundancies in the future.

00:18:55 – 00:22:03
DEC's Strategy for Personal Computers - Cumulation to Later Challenges

Personal computers did not sell well in DEC. Richard attributed this to the company's approach to maintain its traditional technical approach and standards with third-party softwares for PCs. DEC set up a catalogue listing at length of the approved softwares, ensuring each product would meet a list of stringent criteria. This was in stark contrast to the relaxed approach to competitors like Apple, which stated in a simple and stylish sentence, suggesting that software would likely work with Apple PC but without any guarantees. DEC, in the spirit of upholding its reputation for dependability, continued its painstaking approach from its VAX VMS /PDP business model, offering assurances to customers that third-party software would work and be supported, a mentality which was felt to be misaligned with the evolving PC market. However, as PCs began entering people's homes, this strategy for proprietary products seemed increasingly out of touch with market realities, where customers did not expect the same level of detail for consumer-grade products. This shift in the market eventually contributed to the company's challenges in the PC business.

00:22:04 – 00:24:07
Strong Support for his Transition to Pre-Sales Support Role

Richard reflected on his time as a maintainability engineer, which gave him the best of both in access to high innovative concepts and practical field implementation. The role was

crucial in ensuring that the products were both functional and accessible to the customer, and he gained a comprehensive understanding of the software product lifecycle, from inception to delivery. This background knowledge was immensely helpful when he later transitioned to field roles in pre-sales, supporting sales teams. He had an unique edge in exercising his knowledge at meetings around business and market requirements when many of his colleagues in the sales field lacked this deep understanding of product development.

Richard reflected on the huge support he received when he sought out new opportunities within DEC. DEC fostered a culture where employees were expected to move roles every few years to gain broader experience. His manager showed strong support in helping him to secure his new role in the pre-sales team. This internal transfer mechanism later enabled Richard to further diversify his expertise through working across marketing, projects, and systems integration. Richard reflected that DEC placed strong emphasis on staff development through growth and change - staying in one role for more than five years would raise questions within the company.

00:24:07 – 00:28:17
Finding His Own Voice in the Pre-Sales Role

Richard's first pre-sales role in DEC UK was pre-sales consultant supporting the sales team to the Ministry of Defence. His specialisation was in networks and communications, amongst specialists in other areas working closely with salespeople to present technical information to clients. He was particularly adept in explaining and translating complex technical jargons from engineers to customers. Over time, he worked up his career ladder within the company based on the very same skill set - transitioned from being the network specialist on bids to being the design authority, then to managing a team of specialists on bid projects and managing the overall technical design of large bids.

Richard reflected that as someone not as technical as his peers in the company, the ability to act as a bridge between the highly technical engineers and the clients has been a godsend gift to him and has helped define his career in hindsight. He recalled situations where engineers would overwhelm clients with technical details, and it became his responsibility to translate and simplify the information. This skill of acting as an intermediary, able to communicate both technically and plainly, became his niche.

00:28:18 – 00:32:46
DEC's Autonomous Culture

Richard registered the distinct autonomous culture at DEC, where employees enjoyed significant freedom at work. He has never been directly ordered to complete any tasks, yet everyone was very motivated to work on their own initiative. Employees were not

monitored for timekeeping but they were expected to deliver results. The first and only time he received a direct order was after HP took over DEC, which came as a shock after 25 years of autonomy at DEC. He and his team would log their hours against different project codes and if there were no task assignment, members would seek out work themselves. There were no goals or targets set for him unlike the sales targets for salespersons but there was a strong sense of motivation and responsibility within the team to achieve the business opportunities brought in from the sales team. He was constantly driven by the demands of the business, such as bid requests from clients like British Telecom. These events naturally filled up his work schedule.

00:32:47 – 00:36:09
Personal Reflections on Career Satisfaction

Richard enjoyed filling the gaps as a pre-sales consultant. A call on a Monday morning to pull in a team to put together for an urgent bid abroad was both dreadful and an excitement to him. The various events in the sales team kept him busy and kept him going. Reflecting on his career on his retirement, his ambition was to enjoy his own work. He felt with his experience he might move onto more senior roles at director level or broader roles in project management. But he would rather use his strength to move up a few grades higher in the pre-sales capacity for a reasonable salary, rather than stretching himself to manage his weaknesses to climb the corporate ladder. At DEC, Richard found the right mix of balance between skills, ambitions and pay.

00:36:10 – 00:39:11
DEC as A Place for Growth of Talents, Regardless of Academic Qualifications

Richard was glad that, during his time with DEC, he did not feel that his education held him back from his career development. DEC did not place much emphasis on formal qualifications, particularly in the non-engineering roles. His HNC has helped demonstrate his professional knowledge for entry to DEC on the first job, and thereafter, success was defined by enthusiasm, drive, and personality. DEC valued the problem-solving and analytical and learning capabilities that came along with a degree, regardless of the subject.

The management at DEC generally encouraged career growth opportunities within the company. People with good performance could thrive regardless of their educational or professional backgrounds. In his own case, he was suggested to think about moving to a different role in his annual review with his exposure to working with customers and sales. This expectation of career development was a constant within the company, providing employees the opportunities to move to something new and to broaden their horizon through navigating into different roles.

00:39:12 – 00:41:36
World Wide Web and Transition to Telecoms

The conversation shifts to the interviewee's transition into telecoms. Richard recalled a life changing conversation with his wife on his experiment with accessing websites from a home setup, a rudimentary experiment of the early web in 1993. An everyday couple's humour on the speed of the connection (considered as already advanced at that time) raised Richard's interest in getting a foothold in telecoms. Not long after, when he was presented with the opportunity to work with a startup telecoms company, Engis (?)[3], he chose the path over working on a bid for GlaxoSmithKline. From that point on, telecoms became the focus of his career until he retired in 2011.

00:41:37 – 00:42:37
The Unique Role of the Telecoms Department in Surviving the Company's Takeovers

Richard reflected that his work on telecoms helped him survive the corporate takeovers, first by Compaq and later by HP. With a ludicrous top line, the telecoms team was left intact without going into deeper interrogation by the Compaq's senior management. When HP took over, HP did not have a market presence in the telecoms either. The HP acquisition was a relief to Richard, as the company's culture was more aligned with DEC. Despite the changes of the Compaq and HP takeovers, he and his telecoms teammates were left in a status quo.

00:42:38 – 00:45:22
Telecoms in DEC and Major Projects

Richard delves into his early telecoms work, starting with projects in London as a contractor. DEC developed a product called TeMIP[4] (Telecommunications Management Information Platform), which was modular and highly scalable and could be interfaced with different areas of telecom networks, for example, processing alarms and presenting performance data, making it essential for managing the vast infrastructure of telecoms networks. One of the notable projects was with British Telecom (BT), where the team addressed alarm fault management across the country's network without a clear indication of the fault's location. This solution for BT became a significant win, leading to opportunities for other international projects in performance statistics.

00:45:23 – 00:48:04

[3] Electricity Board Startup Company - name not clear
[4] Searchable as "HP TeMIP" a software is a highly automated, fault-management solution that provides operators with a single view of all elements and systems across multiple network types

Pioneering Work on ADSL Automation

For Richard, the most memorable project came in 1997[5] when BT approached DEC with a request to automate the provisioning of the Asymmetrical Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL), which at the time was a new technology. The challenge BT faced was that provisioning phone lines took six weeks, and BT wanted to drastically reduce this time. Without full knowledge on ADSL, the team created a proof of concept that automated the order handling system and provisioning process down to the exchange level, integrating systems from companies like Fujitsu and Ericsson. This framework was a success and laid the groundwork for future broadband provisioning. The framework implemented by Richard is still largely in use today. But at that time, he was unaware of the significance of their work in shaping the internet and broadband. His work was driven by the need to eliminate manual processes to ensure faster service provisioning.

00:48:05 – 00:49:52
Other Telecom Projects

Another key telecom project recounted was with Vodafone. Vodafone had lost track of its equipment, leading to inefficiencies like engineers arriving at base stations only to find no available slots for new cards. By developing an inventory solution in partnership with Cramer, a telecom company based in Bath (later acquired by Amdocs), Richard and his team provided Vodafone with a way to manage their network infrastructure efficiently.

From there, he developed into a role to work on project bids and overseeing the initial phases of the projects before transitioning to more technical engineers, and he got opportunities to travel for project bids such as China.

00:49:53 – 00:52:04
Trusted Partnerships in a Competitive Landscape

DEC faced little direct competition from other IT companies. Its primary competition was against other telecom providers like Ericsson and Fujitsu. These companies aimed to move up their own stack to step into the market of their competitors, leading to a competitive dynamic within telecom infrastructure projects. However, DEC was able to maintain a trusted partner relationship with clients like BT, due to the reliability of their telecom solutions.

00:51:52. – 00:52:25
Move to Project Bid Leadership

[5] Some confusion in the year from the interviewee in the dialogue but 1997 is probable

After moving on from maintainability engineering into pre-sales, Richard initially specialised in networking. Over time, he moved up the ranks, transitioning from a networking expert on bids to overseeing entire technical solutions for complex projects. Moving further up, he managed teams of specialists while still maintaining some involvement in networking, ensuring that the overall technical solutions met the needs of the projects he was involved in. This progression allowed Richard to take on greater leadership responsibility while leveraging his broad technical knowledge and experience. His hands-on knowledge diminished as he moved on this path.

00:52:26 - 00:58:52
Blind Spot of DEC, the Beginning of its Gradual Fall

Richard then moved on to discuss his involvement in a project with the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) which issued an invitation to tender (ITT) on behalf of the Navy, requesting a system solution support to an Onboard Accounting and Stores Inventory System (OASIS), a system intended for ship-based administrative tasks, including word processing, stores management, and accounting.

A controversy arose when DEC was in the process of bidding for the project. DEC's founder, Ken Olsen, reportedly made a public statement calling Unix "snake oil," a damaging statement given on the MOD's requirement for Unix-based systems in the ITT. This created a difficult situation for the team. Ultimately, DEC lost the bid due to pricing rather than technical shortcomings. The loss to the bid deeply frustrated some MOD staff, who were familiar with and preferred DEC's technology over the lower-cost alternative.

Richard reflected on how DEC was slowly falling out of sync with the market, particularly during the rise of the personal computer and Unix-based systems, with its focus on its own proprietary technologies like VMS. The company, led by Ken Olsen, was hesitant to embrace the commodity PC market and insisted on the production of high-quality, best-in-class products. This led to a growing divergence from the need of the customers demanding for more affordable, standardised solutions.

He shared an anecdote from a demo for the MOD bid, where a third-party vendor installed a product on a DEC system without being fully familiar with the operating system - highlighting the flexibility and ease of use of Unix. From that moment on, he realised that Unix would dominate the market. Despite his own realisation, the company culture at DEC remained somewhat blind to the growing influence of Unix and personal computing, which led to its gradual decline as the market shifted towards more open and affordable systems.

00:58:53 – 01:01:45
Working at DEC Park

Richard recalled working in the different locations for DEC in and around the Reading area. Initially, he first joined, he worked in a small office on Acre Road, part of the corporate engineering group. As the team grew, they moved to DEC Park in Reading. When he worked in the pre-sales, he moved to Basingstoke. When he worked in the telecoms, he was based near Farnham but eventually he and all teams moved back to the DEC Park. That was around 1994 and he stayed until the HP takeover, after which he moved to Bracknell.

The three-storey building at DEC Park was enormous, residing in a large central street running through it, complete with amenities such as a bank (Barclay's), a business travel agent (Hogg Robinson), and a shop. The sheer size of the building and the facilities it offered, like coffee tables and an external coffee vendor, made it feel more like a university campus, creating a vibrant atmosphere. Richard thought he had not fully appreciated his work environment at the time but he realised later it was a far cry from his work environment in the early days, which was a very different world.

01:01:46 – 01:05:49
The Great Storm 1987 and the Impact on the Work Environment

DEC was open to employees working from home, and Richard was at the forefront of such a practice, for example, when he worked on the network design for Barclays. However, this remote working was very different from today's connected environment - he had just a phone line for communication when he was needed.

A turning point came in 1987, during the big hurricane, one of DEC's buildings in Basingstoke burned down. Around 500 employees were safe and were relocated to different offices overnight. This led to a query from the management on the amount of empty office space. From that point onwards, DEC shifted to work on a desk-sharing policy and remote working became the norm. To Richard, this change eroded the team cohesion and productivity DEC built on at the time when employees worked in the physical offices.

Richard reflected, from his own perspective, on how the desire not to let his team down had kept him motivated to stay late and work hard during the intensive project time. He reflected that working remotely, while efficient, undermined this team spirit. After home-working took off, the sense of camaraderie and team loyalty that used to exist when people worked together in the same space, became a bygone.

01:05:50 – 01:08:36
DEC and Its Integration with the Reading Community

The DEC Park was an integral part of the company's operations and the local community. This sense of community integration contrasted with the US tech campuses, which were often located out of town and somewhat isolated. In Reading, DEC was a well-established part of the metropolitan area, and its presence had a notable impact on both the company's employees and the local population.

There were instances of confusion, though, like a taxi driver not realising that "DEC" referred to "Digital." DEC made efforts to be part of the community. When DEC Park first opened, public open days were organised with custom-made stickers referenced with the pyramids-like structure of the DEC building as a campaign.

However, expansion plans were limited by the local council, possibly due to concerns about over-reliance on one large employer. As a result, DEC chose to expand to other locations, like Farnham.

01:08:30 –> 01:10:45
The Compaq Acquisition

The interview transitioned to the broader topic of DEC's final trajectory compared to his long years of service at DEC - twenty nine and a half years.

Richard recalled the shock and surprise when the news of DEC being taken over by Compaq broke out, which was completely unexpected at his level. Compaq was seen primarily as a maker of laptops, and no competitor to DEC in the IT or systems arena. The notion of a PC company like Compaq acquiring DEC, known for its big systems, felt incongruent to many within the organisation. Many suspected potential behind-the-scenes actions were at play, especially as DEC's founder, Ken Olsen, had already been ousted by that time.

Subsequently, Compaq itself did not last long as an independent company before being taken over by HP. The Compaq takeover of DEC marked a significant shift in the company culture and direction.

01:10:46 - 01:14:00
Redundancies at DEC

The redundancies at DEC took place around 1992. The first major layoff was in marketing, which was surprising as DEC had previously resisted job cuts. Richard was working as technical support to marketing when half of the team was laid off. Despite lacking experience in marketing, Richard was offered a marketing role. He soon transitioned back to a more familiar technical position.

The redundancy process, initially voluntary, led to a surprising realisation among employees that they could secure better salaries elsewhere. This prompted a significant wave of departures, and DEC responded by offering substantial pay rises to retain key staff. Eventually, Richard stayed with the company, benefiting from a substantial pay increase as DEC tried to retain talent in the face of looming changes.

Richard also compared the redundancy process in Digital at France, where a union rule mandated that those voluntary redundancies must be accepted.

01:14:01 - 01:16:59
HP Takeover

The conversation jumped from the Compaq acquisition in 1998 and the eventual transition to HP. The major focus is the shifting culture at DEC during that period. Richard was working on a telecoms project in Switzerland when he received the news that HP had acquired Compaq. Ironically, it was a project in direct competition with HP Openview (the former name of HP before rebranding). He saw that coming from his work. Despite the initial shock, the transition felt like a "homecoming" to Richard compared to the Compaq acquisition. He felt well respected by HP staff. However, one key difference he noticed was the much more corporate culture of HP. He would receive direct communication from at Palo Alto (HP Headquarter), which felt less relevant to the UK-based staff. This was in contrast to DEC's communication with its staff, which was more tailored for the DEC subsidiary. Some of his colleagues were bothered by it but not Richard himself.

01:17:00 - 01:19:59
Departure through Redundancy

In 2011, Richard took redundancy from HP and left the company since its takeover from 2002[6]. He reflected on the generous terms of redundancy offered to the former DEC employees who had joined before 1997, which he believed was based on the DEC pension scheme. It became an internal joke about the likely roles of targets of redundancy - which would be someone who are international, strategic and in the programming. The opportunity came for him when he was on a project abroad for four years, based in the UK. He shared how, after speaking with his then Italian boss about the prospect of redundancy, he got the offer which he voluntarily accepted. His last working day coincided with the royal wedding of Kate Middleton and Prince William, a sense of optimism and good timing.

01:20:00 - 01:24:07
Reflecting on DEC's Legacy at a Personal Level

[6] Correction from 2001 in the interview.

Richard was full of gratitude for DEC which offered him a unique path for career development over his twenty-nine and a half year tenure with the company, given his humble academic background. This sense of gratitude resonated in the collective memory of DEC on social media, where many of its former employees reflected on DEC as a unique and exceptional place to work.

He believed that the leadership style, embodied by the company's founder Ken Olsen and his Quaker's beliefs, contributed to the company's impressive culture. Richard did not have many other company experience to compare with, but he became aware of this blessed environment of collaborative culture when he encountered other professionals at other companies in harsh predicaments due to the aggressive company culture.

Richard also shared his reflection on how being the "jack of all trades", and not being specialised, had saved him from the fate of being made redundant. In contrast, he witnessed other exemplary peers who were specialists of a line of products were soon swept over upon the company takeovers, as the products in which they were once specialised no longer had a place in the market.

01:24:08 - 01:25:07

DEC's Impact on Reading and the Tech Industry

The interview closed with a reflection on DEC's broader legacy. The current vibrant business activities with a focus on IT and technology would be a legacy that DEC left - DEC was one of the first major IT companies to move into the Reading area, preceding Microsoft and Oracle. Richard also believes that another legacy that DEC left was a lasting positive impression on those who worked there.