

Keith Saunders Access Summary

Keith Saunders, born in 1951, shared his journey from a difficult childhood to a successful career at Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC). He detailed his technical interests, including building a television at 17, and his apprenticeship at Harwell. Saunders joined DEC in 1970, initially as a module repair technician, and later as a consultant engineer. He highlighted DEC's focus on service excellence, customer satisfaction, and technical innovation. Saunders' career progressed to building a European service organization at Alliant and Alcatel, attributing his success to DEC's training and supportive culture. He expressed disappointment with DEC's eventual acquisition by Compaq and HP.

Outline

Keith Saunders' Early Life and Education

- Gavin Clark introduces the interview with Keith Saunders, a former employee of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC).
- Keith Saunders shares his full name and his birthplace, Beckenham, South London, in 1951.
- Keith describes his difficult childhood, including living in a caravan for two years and moving frequently due to his father's redundancy.
- He recounts his early education in various places, and his eventual stability in Bracknell.

Technical Interests and School Experiences

- Keith reveals his early technical interests, including building a television by the age of 17 and reading practical electronics magazines.
- He discusses his school experiences, highlighting his interest in metalwork, woodwork, and technical drawing, including building a steam engine.
- Keith mentions his father's desire for him to work for the General Post Office (GPO) and his own decision to pursue an apprenticeship at the Atomic Energy Authority at Harwell.
- He describes his practical training in electronics at Harwell, including learning engineering and working with discrete components like valves and transistors.

Apprenticeship at Harwell and Early Career

- Keith explains how he applied and passed practical tests for an apprenticeship at Harwell, which included bending wire into specific shapes.
- He details his apprenticeship experience, including six months in Winthrop near Weymouth for engineering training and day release at college for formal training in electronics.
- Keith describes the interview process at DEC, including explaining a circuit diagram to John Crouch and Peter Jones, and being offered a job as a module repair technician.
- He explains the role of a module repair technician, which involved testing and repairing modules to component level, and the physical nature of the work before integrated circuits.

Joining DEC and Early Work Environment

- Keith shares his excitement about joining DEC in 1970 and the small, young workforce at the Arkwright Road office.
- He describes the daily call to the US headquarters at Maynard, which involved a tannoy announcement and a formal interview process.
- Keith explains the work of Computer Special Systems (CSS), which involved building interfaces for customers to interface computers with other devices.
- He highlights the importance of customization in DEC's work and the lack of common standards and interfaces at the time.

Work Culture and Social Life at DEC

- Keith discusses the young, vibrant work culture at DEC, with many employees under 30 and a strong sports and social club.
- He describes the work environment as a "garage" environment, with engineers building and testing modules and interfaces.
- Keith mentions the importance of customer satisfaction and the concept of "service excellence" at DEC, which involved meeting or exceeding customer expectations.
- He shares personal anecdotes about the social life at DEC, including the Christmas party and the common occurrence of DEC employees marrying each other, including Keith and his wife.

Career Advancement and International Experience

- Keith talks about his career advancement, including being given opportunities to attend training courses and travel abroad for DEC.
- He describes his first trip abroad to Sweden to support Volvo and his subsequent trips to the US, including a six-month stay in Marlborough, Massachusetts.
- Keith shares his experiences with DEC's helicopter fleet, which allowed him to travel quickly and cheaply between locations.
- He explains his role as a consultant engineer, advising on new technology and supporting customers and engineers in the field.

Impact of DEC on Personal and Professional Growth

- Keith reflects on the impact of DEC on his personal and professional growth, including gaining in-depth technical knowledge and management skills.
- He mentions the influence of colleagues like Graham Morland and Brian Lowe, who encouraged him to take on new challenges and responsibilities.
- Keith discusses the legacy of DEC, including its focus on project management and process management, which he believes has had a lasting impact on the industry.
- He expresses his loyalty to DEC and the strong relationships he formed with colleagues, which have continued even after leaving the company.

Challenges and Changes at DEC

- Keith acknowledges the challenges DEC faced, including the shift from being a technical company to a business-focused company and the loss of technical leadership.
- He discusses the impact of DEC's acquisition by Compaq and HP, which he believes was a significant departure from DEC's core values and technical expertise.
- Keith highlights the importance of DEC's unique interviewing practices, which focused on practical skills and problem-solving abilities.
- He reflects on the lasting impact of DEC's training programs, which emphasized customer satisfaction and technical excellence.