Why are we making this product? – DEC IAS

Sometimes even a good product shouldn't be made. At a time when DEC dominated the industrial, education and communications computer businesses, the company had developed a series of operating systems (OS) for the various environments: real-time OS for industrial and communication, time-sharing OS for education, and so on.

Rather than take on software development as a primary company focus, however, the company stance was "Software Sells Systems." As a result, the software side of the company was driven by several strong personalities who maneuvered for power and influence within this "secondary" endeavor called software. One of those personalities moved to Switzerland to take on the role of head of European Software Engineering, where he reported to the General Manager of European Operations.

He saw his chance to charter and lead development of a company-wide product when one of the UK-based teams proposed to add a time-sharing layer to an existing real-time OS product. With encouragement from European customers, the company allowed the project to begin. I was recruited to supervise this first-ever company-wide product enhancement being developed outside the company's corporate laboratories. Within weeks I was given responsibility for the underlying product, too. The UK team was extremely capable. Overcoming the remote-team communications problems by having one of the UK team members present at the corporate labs at all times, we managed to release an update to the underlying product and to complete the enhancement within a year.

The real question was: why? The final product operated as a time-sharing system, but the company already had a time-sharing OS product. The underlying real-time system was being supplanted by a later, leaner version, so there was little demand for this real-time OS from new customers.

The answer was: to show that European Software Engineering could do it – a demonstration of capability and power. Was it worth it?

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