Why the HP 85 was "toootally radical" for its time

It's January 1980: The Iran Hostage Crisis has captures global headlines, Ronald Reagan is inaugurated to the US presidency, and the King of Pop's "Rock with You" is number one on the charts. Meanwhile, the tech world is buzzing with excitement over a little machine that would change the landscape of personal computing forever: The HP 85. Released by our Corvallis division, the HP 85 wasn't just another gadget; it was HP's first official foray into the personal computer market, and it was remarkably ahead of its time.

This year, we are celebrating the HP 85 turning 45—a remarkable machine that symbolizes our innovative spirit and ability to adapt to the needs of our customers. The launch of the HP 85 didn't just mark our entry into the personal computer arena; it also set a benchmark in the industry. As the first product HP marketed explicitly as a personal computer, it paved the way for future innovations and established HP as a technology leader.

A computer for a new kind of professional

An efficient desktop case packed with innovation but designed for both technical professionals looking to compute faster scientific calculations and test automations, the HP 85 was based on an 8-bit microprocessor, and combined an alphanumeric keyboard, user read/write memory and a staggering amount of storage at the time. It paved the way for modern laptops and even mobile devices, by creating the first highly reliable--and truly portable--personal computer.

BYTE magazine praised the HP 85 for its performance and anticipated a warm reception from personal computer experimenters and hackers. The magazine also highlighted its graphics capabilities as a significant improvement over existing computers. This was because the graphics for it were impressive for the time, displaying information beautifully across the screen and on paper thanks to that thermal printer that could replicate anything shown on the screen.

Specs to impress

The HP 85 came fully equipped with features like a built-in six-inch CRT display, a tape drive, and a thermal printer—all integrated into a self-contained unit. With standard specs like 16KB of RAM (upgradable to 32KB)--the next-gen HP 85B offered an upgrade to a whopping 544KB using pluggable ROM modules--it provided the capability of the HP 9800 series desktop computers in a smaller package, and at half the price.

The HP 85 sold for around $2,750 (which would be over $12,000 today). All components were designed at the Hewlett-Packard PC division in Corvallis, Oregon, including the

processor and core chipset, which were built around an HP-proprietary [CPU](#) code-named [Capricorn](#).

Putting the "personal" in PC

The World Wide Web wasn't yet invented, but Hewlett Packard was already paving the way for a new way of working with the HP 85. Thanks to its typewriter-style desktop case, it was lightweight yet sturdy enough to withstand travel and workplace demands. Hewlett Packard envisioned the machine changing work-life balance by being used in the office during the day and transitioning to home use at night. Without knowing it, the company had not only created the first portable personal computer, but the first possibility of remote work as well.

This versatility and accuracy made the HP 85 a favorite among professionals in technical fields. It was not just about computing; it was about empowering users to explore their data and automate their testing processes with unprecedented ease and flexibility. Even today, it remains a cherished tool for data acquisition and test equipment automation.

As we aim to lead the future of work, we carry forward the innovative legacy of products like the HP 85 that remind us of our founding principles: to create technology that makes a difference in people's lives.