Dealers of Lightning: Xerox PARC and the Dawn of the Computer Age

By Michael A. Hiltzik

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Based on extensive interviews with the scientists, engineers, administrators, and executives who lived the story, this riveting chronicle details PARC's humble beginnings through its triumph as a hothouse for ideas, and shows why Xerox was never able to grasp, and ultimately exploit, the cutting-edge innovations PARC delivered. *Dealers of Lightning* offers an unprecedented look at the ideas, the inventions, and the individuals that propelled Xerox PARC to the frontier of technohistoiy--and the corporate machinations that almost prevented it from achieving greatness.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Throughout the '70s and '80s, Xerox Corporation provided unlimited funding to a renegade think tank called the Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). Occupying a ramshackle building adjacent to Stanford University, PARC's occupants would prove to be the greatest gathering of computer talent ever assembled: it conceptualized the very notion of the desktop computer, long before IBM launched its PC, and it laid the foundation for Microsoft Windows with a prototype graphical user interface of icons and layered screens. Even the technology that makes it possible for these words to appear on the screen can trace its roots to Xerox's eccentric band of innovators. But despite PARC's many industry-altering breakthroughs, Xerox failed ever to grasp the financial potential of such achievements. And while Xerox's inability to capitalize upon some of the world's most important technological advancements makes for an interesting enough story, *Los Angeles Times* correspondent Michael Hiltzik focuses instead on the inventions and the inventors themselves. We meet fiery ringleader Bob Taylor, a preacher's son from Texas known as much for his ego as for his uncanny leadership; we trace the term "personal computer" back to Alan Kay, a visionary who dreamed of a machine small enough to tuck under the arm; and we learn how PARC's farsighted principles led to collaborative brilliance. Hiltzik's consummate account of this burgeoning era won't improve Xerox's stake in the computer industry by much, but it should at least give credit where credit is due. Recommended. *--Rob McDonald*

From Publishers Weekly
Anyone who uses a personal computer is familiar with technologies pioneered by Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), which started operation in 1970. The received wisdom is that Xerox muffed the chance to dominate the personal computer era by allowing revolutionary technologies developed at PARC to be snatched up by strangers and rivals (most famously, Apple, which took the mouse and the graphical user interface from PARC). L.A. Times reporter Hiltzik argues that the received wisdom is wrong. He expertly situates the story of which products actually made it to market for Xerox (e.g., the laser printer) and which technologies Xerox leaked away (WYSIWYG word processing, hypertext, Ethernet and TCP/IP, to name a few) in a broader analysis of the role of basic science research in business. He praises Xerox execs for understanding the difference between basic research and product development and for exempting PARC from the stultifying effect of having to do the latter. Among the many facts of life on the cutting edge that Hiltzik makes abundantly clear is that very bad decisions are often made for very good business reasons. While granting that Xerox could certainly have better exploited the new technologies issuing from PARC, he emphasizes that the company brought together "a group of superlatively creative minds at the very moment when they could exert maximal influence on a burgeoning technology, and financed their work with unexampled generosity." This is a top-notch business page-turner. Unburdened by any gee-whiz jaw-dropping, yet fully appreciative of the power of creative minds, it is informed by a sure understanding of the complex relationship between business and technology. Major ad/promo.
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From Kirkus Reviews
In the late 1960s, Xerox founded a research center at Palo Alto, Calif. In time, that facility, known as PARC, became ground zero of the computer revolution, as recounted here. In the dinosaur era of computing, a typical machine filled a large room and was shared by dozens of researchers. Los Angeles Times editor Hiltzik (A Death in Kenya: The Murder of Julie Ward, 1991) credits Robert W. Taylor, who assembled the PARC team, with changing that. Taylor's field was psychology, not engineering; but his vision of the

computer as a communications device was a radical departure. He got his chance to realize it when Xerox's chief scientist Jacob Goldman persuaded his superiors to launch a basic research facility along the line of AT&T's famed Bell Labs. Xerox management, more interested in marketable products than in pure science, nearly killed the center before it opened. But Taylor gradually built his team of young computer hotshots, and the innovations flowed: mouse, Ethernet, even the term ``personal computer.'' By 1973, a team led by Chuck Thacker had created Alto, a computer small enough to fit under a desk. Its first program displayed an animated graphic as a test of the user interface: Cookie Monster, from Sesame Street. Two years later, Xerox was selling a mail-order computer kit called Altair 8800one of which inspired a young hobbyist named Bill Gates. But except for the laser printer, Xerox consistently failed to exploit PARC's innovations. Instead, the company pushed the Star workstation, released in 1981. Within six months, IBM had released its first PC, and the Star was obsolete. Meanwhile, Microsoft and Apple Computer (both of which appropriated their design philosophy from PARC) were on the rise. Hiltzik focuses on the human dimensions of the story, taking full advantage of the rich cast of characters involved in earth-shaking developments. A compulsively readable account of perhaps the most important technological undertaking since the Manhattan Project. Highly recommended. (Author tour) -- *Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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