JACK D. KUEHLER
1932–2008

Elected in 1984

“For outstanding engineering, technical, and management leadership in applying leading-edge computer technology to innovative data processing products.”

BY NICHOLAS M. DONOFRIO

JACK KUEHLER, an electrical engineer and former president and vice chairman of the IBM Corporation, died on December 20, 2008, in Rancho Santa Fe, California. He was 76.

Hired in 1958 as an associate engineer at IBM’s San Jose Research Laboratory, Jack went on to become the highest-ranking technologist at IBM and a mentor to a generation of IBM managers and technical professionals. He guided IBM’s highly successful launch into the open-standard workstation computing marketplace and was the architect of a series of alliances that not only restored IBM’s position as a global technology leader but also shored up America’s technological competitiveness.

Jack was revered by the global IBM technical community, not only for his leadership, intellect, and warm manner but also for his example. He was the first engineer to become IBM president, a standout in a company whose senior executives normally rose through the sales or marketing ranks. He also was IBM’s most senior proponent of “wild ducks,” an IBM term for engineers and other technical employees who refused to accept the status quo.
Jack was born in Grand Island, Nebraska, in 1932. He studied mechanical engineering at Santa Clara University and also earned a master’s degree in electrical engineering from the university.

At IBM he advanced rapidly through technical and management positions in research, and in 1967 he was appointed director of IBM’s communications laboratory in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. In 1970 he was appointed director of IBM’s San Jose and Menlo Park development laboratories.

Throughout the 1970s, Jack held senior leadership positions in a number of IBM technical organizations and was named a corporate vice president in 1980. He became an IBM senior vice president in 1982 and throughout the remainder of the 1980s earned a number of IBM executive appointments, including member of the corporate management board, leader of worldwide development and manufacturing, member of the board of directors, vice chairman of the board, and member of the executive committee. He was elected IBM president in 1989 and was named vice chairman in 1993.

Jack was responsible for the engineering, development, and manufacture of all semiconductor components for IBM products and led one of the largest semiconductor operations in the world. In the 1980s he guided IBM’s investment in Intel, as well as its alliance with Hitachi. He also helped bring the United States to the forefront of semiconductor research by helping form an industry-government semiconductor alliance called SEMATECH.

He was chief development executive for IBM’s disk file products and was responsible for the development of magnetic tape and mass storage products—including the IBM 3850, the world’s first commercially available large-capacity magnetic mass storage subsystem.

In the early 1990s, Jack helped shape IBM’s alliance with Apple and Motorola to produce a desktop computing system that combined IBM’s hardware leadership with Apple’s software expertise. The result was the PowerPC microprocessor, which became the basis for Apple computers.
from 1994 to 2006 and remains an architecture family at IBM that powers everything from enterprise-class servers of all sizes to video game consoles and a host of embedded computing applications.

In 1992, Jack became the first IBM leader to chair National Engineers Week (today known as eWeek), a coalition of more than 100 professional societies, corporations, and government agencies dedicated to ensuring a diverse and well-educated future engineering workforce by sharing with young students the benefits of math and science studies and the pursuit of technical careers.

Jack also demonstrated his commitment to diversity in the technical professions by serving on the board of directors of the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering.

His other outside activities included the following: trustee of Santa Clara University; fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers; fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; member of the board of directors of Olin Corporation; member of the board of directors of Aetna Life and Casualty Company; member of the board of directors of the National Association of Manufacturers; member of the board of directors of In Focus Systems; member of the board of directors of Taligent, Inc.; member of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Visiting Committee for Sponsored Research; and director of Parsons Corporation.

Jack authored four technical papers and earned four IBM patents, all involving the development of apparatus and devices for magnetic storage technology. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1984 for his outstanding engineering, technical, and management leadership in applying leading-edge computer technology to innovative data processing products.

On the personal side, Jack was a trusted mentor and cherished friend. Most of what I became at IBM was because of him. He understood the value of technology to IBM’s business, and he saw the promise of technology in helping chart a better world.
During the keynote speech at a major computer trade show in the early 1990s, Jack made this comment about what to expect from ever-advancing technology: “If you can think of it, it will probably happen.”

His widow wrote that:

Jack also shared his talents and good fortune as a philanthropist. He worked with many organizations including The Special Olympics, Literary Council, Parkinson’s Institute, National Cancer Society and the United Way to name a few.”

He will remain in the hearts of many as a peaceful, intellectual leader and mentor who was happiest when he was with his family either on a family vacation, at a family dinner, a ball game, teaching a math lesson, or debating a political issue with one or all of his five children. He also thrived on mentoring young engineers in the college environment at Santa Clara University and other institutions.”

He is survived by his wife Carmen and five children as well as twelve grandchildren. His children are Cyndi Kuehler, Daniel Kuehler, Christy Kuehler-Chappell, David Kuehler, and Michael Kueler.