



Technology & Intellectual Property CompuServe alumni helped advance Central Ohio's tech industry

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CompuServe Interactive Services Inc., a subsidiary of AOL Inc., is a discount Internet connection service tucked into a Dublin office park.

But that's not CompuServe.

In Central Ohio, CompuServe Corp. is the company that never went away. Founded in 1969 and broken up in 1998, it has woven itself into the DNA of everyday online experience and the IT industry.

Its pull is so strong that about 160 former employees showed up for a mixer and tour this month at the company's former Upper Arlington headquarters, now owned by a private school that rents out the complex's concrete-walled data center to cloud computing provider **Expedient Communications**.

Attendees hugged, slapped backs, took cellphone pictures, hunted for their old cubicles, gathered again in the auditorium and laughed at co-founder **Jeff Wilkins'** opening line: "I'd like to welcome you to the CompuServe all-company meeting."

Every person interviewed said since leaving they've never worked at a company like it. They'd once counted 100 "CompuCouples" – pairs who met at or brought their spouses into the company. In a Q&A session, the first question shouted to Wilkins was, "Are you hiring?"

"All organizations have a culture. CompuServe had a cult," said **Roger Blackwell**, former **Ohio State University** marketing professor and a past CompuServe director who attended the reunion. "It was the **Google** of the '80s."

'Bunch of hair-on-fire kids'

Close bonds among the alumni were forged as 20-somethings tackling the then-new concept of home computer usage, said **Paul Lambert**, who started at CompuServe in 1973 and left successor **Verizon Communications Inc.** in 2000 as vice president of network technology.

"We were a bunch of hair-on-fire kids trying to figure out what this industry was all about," he said. "We grew up together.

"We continue to have some of our closest relationships with our colleagues," said Lambert, who has lunch every Wednesday with two to 20 CompuServe alumni.

Employing about 3,600 worldwide at its peak, and about 7,000 through its history, the company was the first to popularize personal email, online shopping and news browsers. Its top software engineer invented the GIF format, those postage-stamp sized animated loops key to viral parodies and online ads.

"We didn't invent everything. We invented a lot of stuff," Lambert said. "We put a lot of pieces together that were floating around. We didn't invent the personal computer, but we sure did take advantage of them."

CompuServe was 80 percent owned by tax giant **H&R Block Inc.** when it was split up and sold off in 1998, with consumer Web services going to AOL Time Warner (now just AOL Inc.) and its business and networking expertise to **WorldCom Inc.**, itself later acquired by Verizon.

As the online revolution exploded, it became harder for Internet connectivity companies to compete with telecommunications giants such as Time Warner and AT&T, who now dominate home Internet connections, Lambert said.

"People who own the wires control the market," he said.

AOL wound down the Upper Arlington operations, shuttering the building in 2007 and moving the last vestiges of the brand to Dublin. The old headquarters was sold last year to Tree of Life Christian Schools, but the city doesn't want a school in the office portion. Expedient rents the data building from the school.

Some company workers went to Silicon Valley and points elsewhere, but many CompuServe executives and engineers went on to software companies and IT departments throughout the region. Hundreds still work for Verizon worldwide.

Internet access is no longer dial-up, but the ideas CompuServe stood for remain influential, said **Janel Crabtree**, director of analyst relations for Verizon Business in Hilliard. She started when it was CompuServe in 1993.

"The need to connect offices and people around the globe is still there," she said. "(CompuServe) did create a lot of great leaders who continue to bring those skills into other companies."

About 30 CompuServe alumni work at Dublin-based OCLC Inc., and reunion attendees said many went on to build up Columbus-based **Sterling Commerce Inc.**, which **IBM Corp.** bought from **AT&T Inc.** last year. Other alumni went to Ohio State University, Nationwide, **NetJets Inc.** and **Pinnacle Data Systems Inc.**

"There's a whole bunch of entrepreneurs who have small below-the-radar outfits," Lambert said.

Wilkins left in 1985 to found now-defunct CD- and DVD-ROM manufacturing business Metatec International Inc. He now is chairman of Health Care DataWorks, an Ohio State spinoff software business.

He told the rapt reunion group it was fun to be back and reminisced about the days he and his father-in-law started the company in a West Fifth Avenue storefront as a spinoff of an insurance company's IT department.

"A mainframe cost a million dollars and had less computing power than the iPhone in most of your pockets," Wilkins said.

But plenty has come full circle, he said. Back then, CompuServe was renting out computing power in the insurer's mainframes outside business hours. The event's host, Pittsburgh-based Expedient, has a network of eight data centers nationwide, including Upper Arlington, where clients store their data in shared servers.

"It's timesharing," he said to big laughs. "I say we were doing it in 1972."

On a tour, regional account executive **Matthew D'Eramo** said Expedient reused a lot of CompuServe's generators, buried power lines and other technology. The computing power is another story.

"It's like comparing the space shuttle to a moped," Wilkins said.

Wilkins said he's glad not only that the building has new life, but that data centers and other network providers in the region are growing.

"It enhances the reputation of Columbus as a big data town," he said.

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Former CompuServe employees gather for the company's reunion in August 2011. Click "next" to begin the slide show.

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