

When Henry Edward “Ed” Roberts was asked in an interview if he really likes his gadgets, he answered “That’s True!” Ed Roberts is credited as the father of the personal computer but more than that he started a chain reaction. Especially since one gadget that no one can live without is their personal computer. The personal computer has changed since Ed Roberts started marketing and selling his Altair 8800. However, had he not started marketing the Altair 8800, we might not have all the gadgets, software, or job options that we have today.

Roberts’ vision was a computer that was affordable to more people than other computers released at the time. Micro-computers were selling for around six thousand dollars, a hefty amount for the early seventies. Very few people could afford a computer at that price and definitely not those that wanted to work on them for fun. Roberts’ wanted to reach out to hobbyists who were interested in working on a computer for fun. Roberts wanted his computer to retail for about four hundred dollars, a much more affordable price. Using the newly released Intel 8080 processor, Roberts and his co-workers at MITS (Micro Instrumentation and Telemetry Systems) released the Altair 8800, selling about five thousand the first year. He had succeeded in bringing computers to thousands who might not have been able to have a computer prior to Altair 8800.

Some of the first software that was created for the Altair 8800 was a BASIC interpreter created by Paul Allen and Bill Gates, while they were working for MITS. Obviously this was a huge starting point for the future founders of Microsoft. They eventually left MITS and started marketing third party software to use on computers such as the Altair 8800. The Altair 8800 computer was one of the first computers to offer third party products. Third party product availability is what allowed a company like Microsoft to reach a level that is difficult to match. Microsoft’s success led to the creation of thousands of other companies. In Boulder alone there are over a hundred listed IT companies, most of which offer third party software.

Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, credits the Altair 8800 as an inspiration for him when building his first personal computer. Today, Apple is among the leaders in creating new forms of personal computers. Even if those personal computers are in the form of gadgets, such as the iPad or iPhone. The iPad and iPhone have continued the tradition set by Roberts to allow access to more people, especially those hobbyists that like their gadgets. These new devices continue to bring new people into the technical industry because they allow anyone to have the ability to create programs for them. The devices reach out to those who want to experiment or program for fun, the hobbyists.

Ed Roberts influence also reaches out to those in the computer science field as well as those outside of the field. The advancement of the personal computer and the gadgets that have developed from it reach beyond the computer science industry and effect many people in other fields as well. My mother is legally blind but because of third party software she is able to work on a personal computer at home and at work. Had it not been for advancements that came as a result of the Roberts’ work and third party software, she might not be able to work. Part of her job involves training others how to work on computers. Who knows, maybe some of those people may go on to have careers in computers and that might just continue the chain effect that Roberts’ started.

Ed Roberts might not have expected the chain reaction that his Altair 8800 started. Millions of people can thank him for their jobs, whether that is in the support industry or third party software creation. Others can actually thank him for the ability to

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do work anywhere in the world at any time. Today, almost everyone has a computer at home; many have multiple computers at home. Many children start working on computers at home at a very early age. Some of these kids might invent technical devices, create gadgets, or write third party software that will continue the chain or help others so that they may in turn continue the chain. People will see those devices, gadgets, or software as way to start a chain reaction of their own. Those devices will be traced back to a domino effect that was started by the Altair 8800 and Ed Roberts.