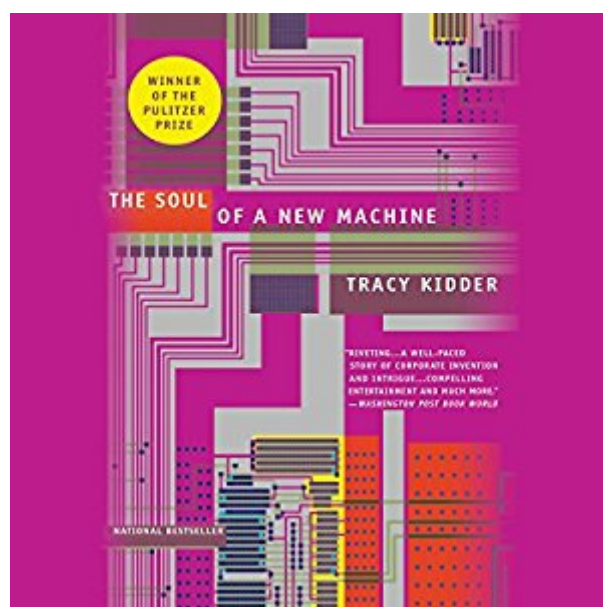The book was found

The Soul Of A New Machine

Synopsis

Computers have changed since 1981, when Tracy Kidder memorably recorded the drama, comedy, and excitement of one company's efforts to bring a new microcomputer to market. What has not changed is the feverish pace of the high-tech industry, the go-for-broke approach to business that has caused so many computer companies to win big (or go belly up), and the cult of pursuing mind-bending technological innovations. The Soul of a New Machine is an essential chapter in the history of the machine that revolutionized the world in the 20th century.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

`The Soul of a New Machine' is a landmark journalistic book-length essay by then `Atlantic Monthly' writer, Tracy Kidder exploring the development of a new computer in those pre-microcomputer days of 1978. I am delighted to find this book issued as a `classic', as I have read it many times and have been meaning to do a review of it for some time. I cannot think of a better occasion than with the release of this new edition.When it was first published, the book was a narrative of what was then `modern' technology, where the central processing units (CPU) or `brains' of commercial minicomputers and mainframe computers were built up on large circuit boards from individual, specialized integrated circuit chips, with each chip integrating dozens or hundreds of discrete components. This compares to today's microcomputers where the entire CPU is placed on a single chip incorporating tens of thousands of discrete functions, all taking up no more room than the average credit card. Now, the book is more a history of how this technology was developed, and yet

its picture of how people work in teams developing technological projects will probably never go out of date.The irony of this book is that the computer being developed by the team described in this book, a 32 bit Eclipse computer developed by the Data General corporation, a competitor to the larger and very successful Digital Computer Corporation (Digital), did not really achieve any major breakthrough in technology. While it was intended to compete with a new generation of Digital VAX machines, it ended up being just barely faster than VAX's in a few special tasks.

In The Soul of a New Machine, Kidder accompanies a team of youngengineers tasked with building a new computer for Data General. Theproject is led by a curt manager with a methodology he calls mushroommanagement (keep them in a damp, dark place, and feed them shit) thatwould be impossible to instate in any sensible company these days. Theproject is of highest significance for the company, and everything isdue yesterday, everyone working in a frantic pace to get the computerout the door before their rivals within the same company beat them toit. The pressure and the intense pace of work is tangible all throughthe book; especially in the chapters on the debugging of the computer,one gets a very solid sense of how difficult it should be to fixhorribly complicated hardware bugs under such intense pressure.Soul of a New Machine hails from a time when the separate parts of acomputer were actually built and tested by hand; a time when the CPUand the ALU resided on separate boards, a computer was debugged usingoscilloscopes, and when finished, occupied three cabinets. For peopleof later generations who grew up with computers that came simplywithin a shiny black box, the story of these engineers provides a niceperspective of where the computer industry came from, and how thecomputer market could have developed in many other directions.The bigger question Kidder is after is what drives young, talentedpeople to spend most of their waking hours on a new computer. Theengineers he follows all have successful academic studies behind them,and are technically inclined, having broken and fixed electricaldevices since their childhood.

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