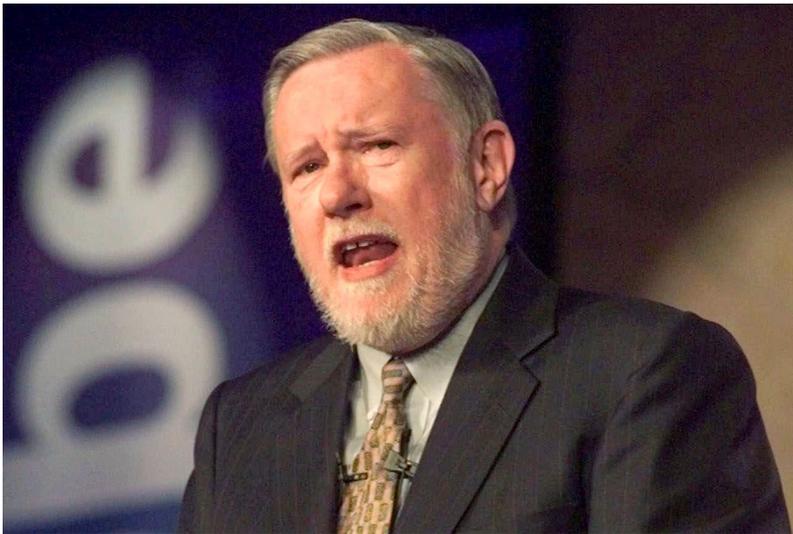


OBITUARIES

Adobe Co-Founder Charles Geschke, Pioneer of Desktop Publishing and PDFs, Dies at Age 81

Computer scientist teamed up with John Warnock at Xerox and formed a firm that rendered traditional printing equipment obsolete



Charles Geschke, seen in 1999, left Xerox to found a company that is now worth 50 times as much as the one he departed.

PHOTO: RICHARD DREW/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [James R. Hagerty](#)

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Charles Geschke, who studied Latin and liberal arts as an undergraduate and once considered the priesthood, discovered computer programming more or less by accident in the 1960s.

That led to a job at Xerox Corp.'s research arm in Silicon Valley, where he bonded with a colleague, John Warnock. They worked on software that eventually would translate words and images on a computer screen into printed documents.

When Xerox was slow to recognize the potential of their ideas, the two men bolted in 1982 and formed what is now [Adobe Inc.](#), a software colossus with a market value of about \$250 billion, or around 50 times the current value of the company they left behind. Adobe software spawned desktop publishing with such familiar programs as Photoshop, Acrobat and Illustrator, along with the ubiquitous Portable Document Format, or PDF, technology.

“We were on a rocket ship,” Dr. Geschke [said in a 2011 speech](#) recounting the early years of Adobe, when he served as president and Dr. Warnock as chief executive. Dr. Geschke said he had never studied business and recalled reading only one business book, which introduced him to the goal of finding an unserved need or gap in the market. Adobe found one of those, he said, “and the gap was huge.”

His success brought some unwelcome attention. In May 1992, while arriving at an Adobe parking lot in his Mercedes sports coupe, Dr. Geschke faced a young man pointing a gun at him. Two kidnappers blindfolded the 6-foot-2 executive with duct tape and kept him tied up in a rented house for several days before Federal Bureau of Investigation agents rescued him.

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Dr. Geschke died Friday at the age of 81, at his home in Los Altos, Calif. His wife, Nan Geschke, said the cause was cancer.

“We were best friends,” Dr. Warnock said in an interview Sunday. “We never had an argument.”

Charles Matthew Geschke, known as Chuck, was born Sept. 11, 1939, and grew up in Cleveland. His father was a photo engraver, producing metal plates clamped onto printing presses to create images in newspapers, books and magazines—a technology later supplanted by Adobe. His mother was a paralegal.

He attended a Jesuit high school and enrolled at Xavier University in Cincinnati. He studied liberal arts because he wanted a broad education, he said later, and added a masters in mathematics “because I figured eventually I’d have to figure out something to do.”

While working as a math teacher at John Carroll University near Cleveland, he met one of his former students who had joined a computer company. The student offered to teach his former professor to write simple programs. Dr. Geschke recalled that one of his first programs involved printing envelopes for a birth announcement.

Fascinated by the technology, he joined a doctoral program at what is now Carnegie Mellon University and obtained a Ph.D. in computer science in 1973. He was involved in research funded by the Defense Department’s Advanced Research Projects Agency, or ARPA. Later he described himself as an “ARPA brat” of the sort that spawned scores of Silicon Valley startups.

Xerox hired him to work at its Palo Alto Research Center, or PARC, the source of many of the ideas behind early personal computers designed for the mass market. Dr. Geschke recruited Dr. Warnock to PARC. The two men found they had much in common: Both had beards and three children. Both were volunteer referees for children’s soccer.

Dr. Geschke recalled that Xerox executives informed him that the company needed seven years to launch a new product. “I was concerned that here was technology that was state of the art,” he told Computer Reseller News later. “Technology is like fish: If you don’t cook it, it spoils.”

With funding from the venture capital firm Hambrecht & Quist, the two men launched Adobe. Apple Computer Inc. was an early customer. Adobe’s PostScript language drove Apple’s LaserWriter printers. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Apple and Microsoft Inc. joined forces to challenge Adobe in desktop-publishing software, but Adobe prevailed in what was dubbed “the font wars.”

Dr. Geschke is survived by his wife of 57 years, three children and seven grandchildren.

He was known for his gentle personality and self-deprecating sense of humor. He often said his policy was to hire people smarter than himself and quipped that was “a larger pool.”

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