

MICROPROCESSOR *report*

Insightful Analysis of Processor Technology

In Memoriam

MICHAEL SLATER, MICROPROCESSOR GURU

Founder of Microprocessor Report Succumbs to Cancer

By Linley Gwennap (July 11, 2016)

Michael Slater, founder of this newsletter as well as a friend and mentor to many of our staff, has passed away at the age of 60. His career spanned several phases: R&D engineer, design consultant, microprocessor analyst, entrepreneur. Despite starting his career as an electrical engineer, his most recent ventures involved digital-media software and web-site development. These varied projects all benefited from his leadership, innovation, and drive for perfection. He was well respected throughout the industry.

Although his later ventures were quite successful from a business standpoint, Slater is best known for his time at *Microprocessor Report*. When he started the newsletter in 1987, no one else was providing regular technical analysis of the young industry. As microprocessors became more popular, Slater's expertise was in demand. He was frequently quoted in mainstream business publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Business-Week* as well as many technical magazines. During a dozen years at the newsletter, he personally wrote hundreds of articles while juggling as many as five regular columns in other publications.

In 1988, Slater launched what turned into the Microprocessor Forum. The event became a crossroads for the microprocessor industry, a meeting place where designers could compare notes with their peers. Each year, the leading processor companies unveiled their latest products at the Forum. In the late 1990s, more than 1,000 people attended, most paying more than a thousand dollars for the privilege.



Michael Slater, founder of *Microprocessor Report*. This photo was taken around 2002. (Source: Adobe)

Slater's presentations were always a highlight, as he summed up the latest industry trends succinctly and with a dry wit.

Building on his interest in digital photography, he cofounded PhotoTablet (later Fotiva) in 2000. In late 2001, Adobe acquired Fotiva and later released its software as Photoshop Album, a popular program that was eventually integrated into Photoshop Elements. Slater worked at Adobe until 2006 before cofounding another company, Webvanta, which creates web sites for educational institutions and nonprofit organizations.

Getting Started

Born in 1955, Michael was the third and youngest child of Helen and Dan Slater. He was interested in electronics at a young age,

and by 12 he was already disassembling and constructing electrical equipment. After growing up in the Los Angeles area, he came north to attend UC Berkeley, where he earned a BS in electrical engineering in 1977. From there, it was a short hop to Santa Clara, where he worked for Hewlett-Packard. His first project was to write a microprocessor training manual for HP field engineers and sales teams. This project helped Slater discover his gift for writing.

But he was never comfortable working in a big company, so he left HP in 1980 and set up shop in Palo Alto, offering microprocessor training and design consulting. During this period, he met and married Irene Stratton. In his spare time, Slater began working on a textbook based on the HP training manual. In 1987, he completed the

For More Information

Michael Slater's blog is available at www.partingthoughts.net. It includes posts about his personal background, essays on a variety of topics, photo galleries, and the story of his final months.

The Computer History Museum will be posting his oral history at www.computerhistory.org/collections/oralhistories once editing and production is complete.

book, which Prentice-Hall published as *Microprocessor-Based Design*. Billed as “a comprehensive guide to effective hardware design,” the book offered a real-world perspective on building microprocessor-based systems.

As Slater described it, his original idea for the newsletter was an “update service” for the book (see [MPR 8/25/97](#), “Looking Back on 10 Years of MPR”). Even at the time, the microprocessor industry was developing quickly, with new products appearing on a regular basis. Initially, he wrote most of the articles himself but recruited other freelancers and consultants to help out. Taking advantage of the recent innovation of desktop publishing, he could lay out the newsletter on his PC. Slater served as editor while his wife Irene handled the business operations for the company they dubbed MicroDesign Resources (MDR).

Growing Interest in Microprocessors

The newsletter, which debuted in September 1987, was the perfect vehicle for what Slater called his “insatiable curiosity” and his love of writing, allowing him to learn about and write about the latest products and technologies. His keen intellect helped him quickly grasp the essential facets and explain them to his readers. Although the newsletter began as a guide for designers, it quickly became an important source of news and analysis; indeed, the very first issue broke the story of the Intel P9 project, which was later announced as the 386SX (see [MPR 9/87](#), “Intel’s P9 Could Make 286 Architecture Obsolete”).

Although Slater didn’t realize it at first, the launch of *Microprocessor Report* was perfectly timed to cover the emergence of RISC technology. After years of research and development, “1988 was the year that RISC processors began to seriously challenge CISC,” as he wrote in early 1989. The RISC-CISC battle provided plenty of fodder for newsletter articles and was the primary topic of MDR’s first conference, held in the fall of 1988. This event drew 250 attendees and would become the annual Microprocessor Forum. (Although the final Microprocessor Forum took place in 2007, its spiritual successor continues as the Linley Processor Conference, which will take place this fall on September 27–28.)

Slater’s industry knowledge soon made him a sought-after authority. In those days, reporters generally included in their stories a quote from an independent source (that is, one unaffiliated with the subject of the story), and Slater’s

quotes helped establish his reputation—and the newsletter’s—as the leading source of microprocessor insight. He was also invited to write regular columns for *EE Times*, *Electronic Business*, *Nikkei Electronics*, *PC Magazine*, and other industry publications. These columns, along with his own newsletter and conferences, made Slater a rock star in the microprocessor industry.

In May 1990, he moved the company and his family to the small town of Sebastopol, located in the wine country two hours north of Silicon Valley. He enjoyed the relaxed lifestyle of the area, and shortly thereafter he and Irene adopted their first child, Gregory. As the business continued to grow, Slater decided to sell it to Ziff Davis in 1992. The new parent company provided funding to open a Silicon Valley office, hire full-time analysts, and further expand the business.

Over time, Slater was able to relinquish the editor-in-chief position and operational control of the business, but he continued to oversee the publication and maintain the high editorial standards that helped *Microprocessor Report* win four Computer Press awards as Best Newsletter during this time. He continued to write regularly and published some of his favorite articles, including “The Future of Computing Platforms” (see [MPR 8/21/95](#)), “Microprocessors Changing the World” (see [MPR 8/5/96](#)), and “The Microprocessor Millennium” (see [MPR 12/27/99](#)). His family expanded to include a daughter, Amanda, as well as several pets and a boat that he enjoyed piloting around San Francisco Bay.

Entrepreneurial Success

Ziff Davis (then part of SoftBank) sold MDR to Reed Elsevier in 1999, resulting in changes to the management structure. Shortly thereafter, Slater’s entrepreneurial urges kicked in, and he left to cofound PhotoTablet with the goal of building a tablet appliance for photo storage and viewing (see [MPR 7/31/00](#), “A New Era for Photography...and Me”). His title was chairman, but he was the driving force behind the product’s design.

The company later dropped the hardware component but continued to develop software for organizing photos on a PC. Licensing this software to camera makers proved to be an unprofitable strategy, but Adobe saw potential in the software and acquired the small company for an undisclosed sum. Slater served as a manager at Adobe for five years, commuting to San Jose once a week but mostly working from his Sebastopol home.

As part of his continual reinvention, Slater became fascinated with web-site development—in particular, a new language called Ruby on Rails. More properly called a web-application framework, Rails greatly simplified the development of content-rich web sites. Slater left Adobe in 2006 and the following year cofounded Webvanta (with Christopher Haupt) to offer web-site development services. He served as president of the company and built a small team of developers (see [MPR 9/17/12](#), “Where Are They Now?”).

In November 2015, Slater was diagnosed with intestinal cancer, which is typically fatal within 3–6 months. After a round of chemotherapy failed to completely wipe out the disease, he decided to deal with the issue as he had dealt with many other problems: by writing about it and posting publicly. He was able to enjoy time with friends and family during his last few months. He died peacefully in his home on June 19, just a few weeks after recording an “oral history” for the Computer History Museum.

Slater is survived by his wife, Irene, and his children Gregory, now 26, and Amanda, 20. He is also survived by his company Webvanta (recently acquired by Xfive), the Fotiva software that still lives in Adobe’s products, and of course this publication, which is still going strong after 28 years. Michael set a high standard for excellence in writing and in technology insight, and we strive to carry it forward under his *Microprocessor Report* banner. ♦

To subscribe to *Microprocessor Report*, access www.linleygroup.com/mpr or phone us at 408-270-3772.