

By Jack Wallen

It's unlikely that everyone will ever agree on the most important dates in the history of IT. I know my IT timeline has a personal and professional bias. But I've tried to be objective in examining the events that have served to shape the current landscape of the modern computing industry. Some of the milestones on my list are debatable (depending upon where you are looking from), but some of them most likely are not. Read on and see what you think.

1 The development of COBAL (1959)

There are many languages out there, but none has influenced as many others as COBAL has. What makes COBAL stand out is the fact that there are still machines chugging along, running COBAL apps. Yes, these apps could (and possibly should) be rewritten to a modern standard. But for many IT administrators, those who don't have the time or resources to rewrite legacy apps, those programs can keep on keeping on.

2 The development of the ARPANET (1969)

It is an undeniable fact that the ARPANET was the predecessor of the modern Internet. The ARPANET began in a series of memos, written by J.C. R. Licklider and initially referred to as the "Intergalactic Computer Network." Without the development of the ARPANET, the landscape of IT would be drastically different.

3 The creation of UNIX (1970)

Although many would argue that Windows is the most important operating system ever created, UNIX should hold that title. UNIX started as a project between MIT and AT&T Bell Labs. The biggest initial difference (and most important distinction) was that it was the first operating system to allow more than one user to log in at a time. Thus was born the multi-user environment. Note: 1970 marks the date the name "UNIX" was applied.

4 The first "clamshell" laptop (1979)

William Moggridge, working for GRID Systems Corporation, designed the Compass Computer, which finally entered the market in 1991. Tandy quickly purchased GRID (because of 20 significant patents it held) but then turned around and resold GRID to AST, retaining the rights to the patents.

5 The beginning of Linus Torvalds' work on Linux (1991)

No matter where you stand on the Linux versus Windows debate, you can't deny the importance of the flagship open source operating system. Linux brought the GPL and open source into the forefront and forced many companies (and legal systems) into seeing monopolistic practices as well as raising the bar for competition. Linux was also the first operating system that allowed students and small companies to think in much bigger ways than their budgets previously allowed them to think.

6 The advent of Windows 95 (1995)

Without a doubt, Windows 95 reshaped the way the desktop looked and felt. When Windows 95 hit the market the metaphor for the desktop became standardized with the toolbar, start menu, desktop icons, and notification area. All other operating systems would begin to mimic this new de facto standard desktop.

7 The 90s dot-com bubble (1990s)

The dot-com bubble of the 90s did one thing that nothing else had ever done: It showed that a great idea could get legs and become a reality. Companies like Amazon and Google not only survived the dot-com burst but grew to be megapowers that have significant influence over how business is run in the modern world. But the dot-com bubble did more than bring us companies -- it showed us the significance of technology and how it can make daily life faster, better, and more powerful.

8 Steve Jobs rejoining Apple (1996)

Really, all I should need to say here is one word: iPod. Had Jobs not come back to Apple, the iPod most likely would never have been brought to life. Had the iPod not been brought to life, Apple would have withered away. Without Apple, OS X would never have seen the light of day. And without OS X, the operating system landscape would be limited to Windows and Linux.

9 The creation of Napster (1999)

File sharing. No matter where you stand on the legality of this issue, you can't deny the importance of P2P file sharing. Without Napster, file sharing would have taken a much different shape. Napster (and the original P2P protocols) heavily influenced the creation of the BitTorrent protocol. Torrents now make up nearly one-third of all data traffic and make sharing of large files easy. Napster also led to the rethinking of digital rights (which to some has negative implications).

10 The start of Wikipedia (2000)

Wikipedia has become one of leading sources of information on the Internet and with good reason. It's the single largest collaborative resource available to the public. Wikipedia has since become one of the most often cited sources on the planet. Although many schools refuse to accept Wiki resources (questioning the legitimacy of the sources) Wikipedia is, without a doubt, one of the largest and most accessible collections of information. It was even instrumental in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, when the candidates' Wiki pages became the top hits for voters seeking information. These presidential Wiki pages became as important to the 2008 election as any advertisement.

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