

TOP 25 EXECUTIVES

ESBER: Maintaining Ashton-Tate's Direction, Future Strategies



**Ed
Esber**

Ashton-Tate

Having called at 12:59 p.m., one minute before he was scheduled to do so. Esber opened the conversation by saying: "Hi. I understand you would like to talk to me." formal credits—an undergraduate degree in computer

What a change! Especially when dealing with a man who in three years has turned a small data-base software developer, called Ashton-Tate, into a \$190-million software and information-services company.

Although he has a list of formal credits—an undergraduate degree in computer engineering, an MBA from Harvard, an engineering background with IBM Corp., and so on—chairman and chief executive officer Ed Esber still manages to maintain rapport with not only the company's employees, but with former colleagues who are connected with some of Ashton-Tate's biggest competitors.

This characteristic has enabled Esber and Ashton-Tate to keep the lines of communication open and to stay abreast of technology and other market developments.

With a snicker in his voice, Esber says that one of his friends and co-workers back in his earlier days at VisiCorp was Mitch Kapor, former chairman of Lotus Development Corp. He added that Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft Corp., is also a friend and respected colleague.

Referring to Lotus, Microsoft and Ashton-Tate—the three largest microcomputer-software companies, respectively—Esber says, "We are finally coming to grips with our responsibility in setting standards, and it is, really ironic because Kapor and I worked together in the past."

But Esber's placid exterior belies the keen sense of direction and high energy level required of this top executive who has kept the heat on such powerful companies, as Lotus and Microsoft. And Esber has staffed up for what he calls "the next phase" in the microcomputer-software industry, one that he anticipates will result in less amicable relations between he and his competitors.

"This business has been able to remain friendly, but I'm afraid that between 1987 and 1988 it will get less friendly, because we will all begin to compete in each other's areas," he says with a somewhat apologetic tone.

And with aspirations of making Ashton-Tate the largest computer-software company, Esber says, "I haven't even come close to completing what I want to do here."

According to Esber, the addition of Luther Nussbaum, Ashton-Tate's new president and chief operating officer, will further support the developer's quest for the No. 1 spot in the software arena.

Nussbaum, who formerly served as senior vice president of marketing and operations at Businessland Inc., coupled with executive vice president Roy E. Folk, will enable Esber to concentrate on other areas of the company's business in order to spark future growth, Esber explains.

"I just want the time to get back to the things that I like to do, such as developing strategies, customer relations, investor relations, acquisitions and new-product development," says Esber.

For example, Ashton-Tate—pleased with its acquisitions of Multimate International Corp. and Decision Resources Inc.—is eyeing a "small number of companies that would make sense to acquire," Esber says. And he is involved with the screening of all these companies every step of the way.

According to Esber, the purchase of Multimate, which enabled Ashton-Tate to enter the word-processing market, has worked out better than the company planned. "Multimate has exceeded the financial expectations. Ashton-Tate had set for it," he says.

Esber adds it is still too early to judge just how beneficial the merger with Decision Resources will be because the transaction was only completed about one month ago. But those are the types of acquisitions—those that enable Ashton-Tate to enter new market segments with established products and significant market share—that Esber wants the company to pursue.

Yet another indication of Esber's commitment to stay in step with, and eventually move ahead of, his rivals was the restructuring of the company's divisions earlier this year.

The company's restructuring resulted in a clear separation of products and services, and set the foundation for the newly created systems services and information division, which was developed to accommodate Ashton-Tate's base of corporate customers.

The marketing and management abilities that Esber possesses and relies on seem to be the very same traits that his colleagues view as his greatest strengths. Bill Gates, for example, said, "These are the very strengths that make Esber comparable to Microsoft president Jon Shirley. They [Esber and Shirley] are financially sophisticated and like to analyze cost structures, business results, and things like that."

Esber expects next year to be busy and prosperous for Ashton-Tate, and he is relying on the company's revamped management team, active product groups, and service and support division to see it through the long-term.

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