

English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library

April 9, 2026

Apple at 50 Years

Apple Inc. officially turned 50 years old this year. The Apple Computer Company was founded on April 1, 1976 and incorporated in 1977. Most of us know about two of the co-founders, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. They were both college **dropouts** who were **obsessed** with the idea of making computers small enough for home and school use.

In 1976, a "computer" was an expensive piece of equipment owned only by governments, universities, or big **corporations**. There was no such thing as a "personal computer" let alone a laptop or smartphone that people could use in their homes and carry around with them.

Apple was not alone in this pursuit of "**microcomputers**." In the 1970s, there was a kind of **gold rush** of **entrepreneurs** and **hobbyists** racing to build the first one. Apple was one company among many in an explosion of competitors. Apple is one of the few from the 1970s that is still in business.

In fact, Apple is the second largest company in the world after NVIDIA in terms of its market value. Today, Apple is worth \$3.77 trillion dollars! However, this is not just due to the two Steves. There was another man who helped **steer** the company in the early days. We will read about him today. First, review the vocabulary.

Vocabulary: Match the words to their meanings.

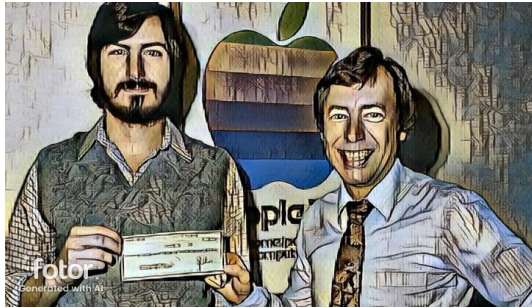
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| 1. angel investor
(an-gel in-vest-er) | A. a large company or group of companies that is controlled together as a single organization |
| 2. corporation (kor·por·ay-shun) | B. to think about or work on something constantly |
| 3. dropout (drop-out) | C. a person who provides money to a business especially a startup in exchange for partial ownership of the company; venture capitalist |
| 4. entrepreneur (ahn-truh-pruh-nur) | D. unusually strange or odd; bizarre |
| 5. hobbyist (hob-ee-ist) | E. to build or work on something in an unsystematic way |
| 6. microcomputer
(my-kroh-kuhm-pyoo-ter) | F. a person who pursues an activity out of interest and not as one's main job |
| 7. to obsess (ahb-ses) | G. a personal computer |
| 8. outlandish (out-lan-dish) | H. a person who starts and manages a business, often risky |
| 9. scruffy (skruhf-ee) | I. a student who leaves school before graduating |
| 10. to steer (steer) | J. shabby; untidy; not neat |
| 11. to tinker (ting-ker) | K. a situation in which a lot of people hurry to pursue riches like racing to a newly discovered gold field |
| 12. gold rush | L. to guide the direction of a vehicle or organization |

ANSWERS: 1 – C; 2 – A; 3 – I; 4 – H; 5 – F; 6 – G; 7 – B; 8 – D; 9 – J; 10 – L; 11 – E; 12 – K

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Apple: The Adult in the Room



Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak were young men with big dreams in 1976. They provided the spark and the fuel to start Apple Computer and many people think they were most responsible for its success. However, it's likely that Apple would not be the company it is today without a man named Armas Clifford "Mike" Markkula Jr.

Mike Markkula (MAR-koo-lah) is a Finnish American electrical engineer, businessman and investor. He was the original **angel investor**, first chairman, and second CEO for Apple Computer. He provided the critical early funding, managerial skill and—most importantly—the direction for a successful company. He was the so-called "Adult in the Room."

The Millionaire Who Came Out of Retirement

In 1976, Mike Markkula was already a success story. Having made a fortune from stock he was given by Fairchild Semiconductor and Intel where he worked, he was able to retire at the age of 32. His plan was simple: spend his days **tinkering** and consulting. That goal changed when a businessperson he knew introduced him to a young, **scruffy** Steve Jobs.

Unlike the traditional bankers who saw two college **dropouts** in a garage, Markkula saw a new industry. He didn't just give Apple advice; he invested \$250,000 in the company. In exchange, he became a one-third owner. It was the moment Apple transitioned from a partnership of friends into a real **corporation**.

The "Apple Marketing Philosophy": A Legacy of Three Words

The day that Apple became a **corporation**, Markkula wrote "The Apple Marketing Philosophy." It was a one-page memo that made his greatest impact on the company culture. It outlined three core ideas that still guide Apple today:

- **Empathy:** A deep, almost **obsessive** understanding of the customer's feelings and needs.
- **Focus:** To do a few things well, one must eliminate all unimportant opportunities.
- **Impute:** The belief that people judge a book by its cover.

This led to Apple's legendary **obsession** with high-quality packaging and industrial design. Markkula understood that if a computer was presented in a sloppy way, the user would think the technology inside was sloppy.

A Start Up with a Future?

In the spring of 1977, Peter Carey, a reporter with the San Jose Mercury News, visited the company to write the newspaper's first story about Apple. As he walked in, he saw filing cabinets everywhere and thought, "This place isn't going anywhere."

On top of that, when he met the two Steves, he wasn't exactly impressed. They didn't inspire confidence. "They just seemed like young guys," Carey said. "I was afraid they might be in a little over their heads." Then he met Mike Markkula.

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Unlike the shaggy-haired founders, Markkula looked the part — dress shirt, tie, composed. During their interview, Markkula reached across his desk and slid a letter toward Carey. It was from a farmer in Iowa.

The farmer wanted to know if Apple had a computer that could help him calculate the best return on his fields based on past yields. It was a question that, at the time, seemed almost **outlandish**. “We’re getting 40 letters a day like this,” Markkula told Carey, smiling.

That was the moment Carey realized he might be wrong. He thought, “Wow. These guys are on fire.” Apple was about to release a product that would set it apart – the Apple II.

When the Apple II was introduced later that year, it helped transform the computer from a **hobbyist’s** toy into something practical. It was a machine that could run programs for everyday tasks like managing finances, writing documents, or managing a farm.

Early software programs for the Apple II would provide real-world solutions to many problems. Markkula programmed some of these applications himself. They included a checkbook-balancing program, an arithmetic assistant for children, and a finance calculator for adults.

Carey came to understand that it wasn’t the filing cabinets — or even the founders — that revealed Apple’s future. It was that letter from the farmer.

That farmer, hundreds of miles from Silicon Valley, imagined how a computer could change his work. Apple didn’t just build machines. It recognized, earlier than most of its competitors, that ordinary people were ready for them.



Discussion Questions

1. When was the first time you used a computer? What did you use it for?
2. If you used a computer before they were common, did you think they would change the world?
3. Do you think it is strange not to use a computer these days?
4. Can you not use your smartphone for a day? A week? A month?
5. How important is marketing to the success of a company?
6. Are there other companies that were made successful by someone who stayed in the background?
7. Do you think it was a fluke that Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak got to meet Markkula? According to Steve Wozniak, it was Markkula that actually deserves credit for Apple's early success. (see this article <https://www.businessinsider.com/wozniak-credits-mike-markkula-with-apples-success-2012-5>)
8. What do you think of Apple products and their design?
9. Have you heard of “Mike” Markkula before? For some information about what he is doing now, here’s a link to Santa Clara University’s Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (<https://www.scu.edu/ethics/>). He and his wife Linda funded this center to promote ethical decision-making in tech and society.

References

- <https://www.mac-history.net/the-silent-architect-how-mike-markkula-turned-a-garage-hobby-into-a-corporate-empire/> Source: Historical Records of Apple Computer Leadership (1976-1997).
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