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A Gentle Introduction to the VAX System

John R. Hubbard

University of Richmond, jhubbard@richmond.edu

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A GENTLE
INTRODUCTION

TO THE

VAX™ SYSTEM

J. R. HUBBARD

Professor of Mathematics & Computer Science
University of Richmond
Richmond, Virginia

Introduction

'Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?' he asked.
'Begin at the beginning,' the King said, gravely,
'and go on till you come to the end:
then stop.'

Lewis Carroll (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland)

In the "good old days," only people with some experience in electronics, and a great deal of determination, used computers. The activity required punching thousands of holes in "IBM cards," and then submitting the resulting deck to the computing center. Much later (often several days), the resulting output could be retrieved. This laborious task would be repeated until, finally, all of the "bugs" had been found and removed from the program.

Fortunately, those "good" old days are now gone forever. Today, people whose technical skills might not even be sufficient to drive a car are using computers to write text files and even original programs. Powerful, high-speed microcomputers can be bought for less than a week's wages. Modems use telephone lines to connect these micros to larger computers, and to vast data banks and information services. Scientists in research laboratories and universities have easy access to computers which analyze their data almost instantly.

Like most mainframe computer systems, the Digital Equipment Corpora-

tion's VAX computers are usually accessed through remote terminals. These television-like boxes are connected to the computer itself, which might be in another building, or even another city. Because the communication between the terminal and the computer is so fast, it is easy for the user to think that the terminal is actually the computer. This misconception is especially common among those who have used stand-alone microcomputers, like an Apple or an IBM-PC.

The VAX, however, is actually a multi-user, time-sharing system. This means that many people might be using the same computer at the same time. Each user has a terminal with its own connection to the VAX. If the terminals are in different rooms, the users might even be unaware that anyone else is using the same computer. This magic is achieved through the computer's *operating system*, which continually, but invisibly, switches users on and off from the computer's *central processing unit* (its "brain").

To use the VAX, you must first have an *account* set up by the authority which operates the VAX. Once your account has been created, you will be given a *username* and a *password*. Your username is a unique combination of letters which identifies you to the VAX/VMS system. It will be the first thing you type each time you "log in" to the system. Your password exists for your protection, to prevent unauthorized people from using your account. It is the second thing you type whenever you log in.

The VAX computers at the University of Richmond are controlled by the Academic Computing Center. Each student enrolled in a course which uses a VAX is given an account at the beginning of the semester. Students' usernames are simply their last names followed by as many letters of their first names as it takes to make a total of nine letters. For example, Ronald Reagan would be given the username "REAGANRON." The student's password is identical to the username.

In addition to getting your password and username, you should also find out where the terminals to your VAX are located and what hours you may use them. Use the following spaces to record this essential information for your own reference.

Username:
Password:
Location of Terminals:
Hours:

Now you have all the information you need to begin using the VAX. If you have the opportunity to work with an experienced user, plan to do so. If not, try to arrange to work with another novice. Two heads are better than one. But, even on your own, you will find that the VAX is a very "user-friendly" computer. You should be able to work through this entire tutorial on your own without any trouble. Plan to spend about 60 minutes on each chapter.