

APPLE WITHOUT JOBS NOT LIKELY TO BREAK MUCH NEW GROUND

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In the days surrounding the release of the Steve Jobs biography, readers quickly discovered many juicy little nuggets about the enigmatic Apple founder. After the flurry subsided, I settled in to give the book a thorough reading to see what lessons it offered.

The book delivers a fully formed portrait of Jobs as a one-of-a-kind businessman, an insufferable jerk who was blessed with uncanny design instincts and the ability to drive his minions to greatness. But while the book is full of interesting revelations about Jobs, the biggest surprise was what it told me about the future of his company:

Apple's golden age is over.

The company won't collapse tomorrow. But without Jobs, its decade-long march of big innovations is done. Mostly likely, the company will continue to chug along, grinding out incremental updates, banking healthy profits. It will enter a sedate, middle age. Gone are the days when the company will single-handedly revolutionize entire industries with dazzling new products, the way it did in succession with the iPod, iPhone and iPad.

The Jobs bio, written by the esteemed Walter Isaacson, does not explicitly make this claim. But it unintentionally makes a convincing case that Apple's run of innovation will end with the premature passing of Jobs.

Before reading the book, I figured it was wrong to assign Jobs all the credit. Indeed, in recent months, the company seems to have gone to some pains to highlight the important roles played by other executives, such as design genius Jony Ive. It's sought to emphasize Apple's deep bench. In the book, people like Ive often chafe at the fact they believed Jobs was getting too much credit.

But if the book is indeed accurate, then Jobs played an essential role at every critical juncture of Apple's journey from the moment he returned in the late 1990s. From the depths of his imagination, he plucked large-scale visions of what Apple needed to do next. At the same time, he was also a micromanager, reviewing and obsessing over every little detail.

After reviving Apple's fortunes with the iMac, for instance, it was Jobs who decided the company would move to a "digital hub" strategy in 2001. The personal computer would simply become a hub for other devices and activities, rather than the focus. That led Apple to develop software to manage photos and videos, then iTunes and the iPod to manage music. That also was essential to its success over the next decade.

And it was Jobs who, after growing frustrated with the state of Internet mobile phones, decreed the company would create its own phone.

It's true that Jobs' designer Ive led the team that designed the phone. But it was Jobs who, according to Isaacson, after a sleepless night, decided that Ive's team was headed down the wrong path after months of work and insisted they start over.

That is the question the book left me asking: Who is the person at Apple who will wake up at 3 a.m. and realize that the latest product is all wrong? Will that person have the courage and standing to walk into Apple, announce he "doesn't love the latest product" and persuade the company to scrap it and start from scratch after months of work? Jobs did that over and over in his career, Isaacson notes, and his charisma and self-confidence made even folks like Ive willing to follow these gut-wrenching U-turns.

Jobs had the ability to do that because he saw himself, first and foremost, as devoted to creating great products. His biggest insult was to declare that someone else did not share that focus. For instance, he condemned John Sculley, the man who fired him, for being more salesman than product guy. And of his rival Bill Gates, Jobs says: "Bill likes to portray himself as a man of the product, but he's really not. He's a businessperson."

But guess who else Jobs lumps into this category? Apple's current CEO, Tim Cook. "But Tim's not a product person, per se," Jobs tells Isaacson.

At the other end of the spectrum, Jobs seemed to micromanage nearly every aspect of Apple's business. When iTunes launched, he personally called musicians to persuade them to make their music available. With the iPhone, he became obsessed with mastering the science of glass, believing the phone's face should be glass rather than plastic. He edited and revised Apple's commercials. He selected the materials used in its stores.

People like Bono were persuaded to do things for Apple simply because they were in awe of Jobs. Who among the current executives could enthrall outsiders in the same way?

Of course, Jobs hoped part of his legacy would be creating a company that could remain great for years to come. But there are some signs the approach that served Apple well for the past decade, a tight integration of all systems, might not be the right approach going forward.

Gates was wrong many times about Apple. But I think he may be right, near the end of the book, when he says: "The integrated approach works well when Steve is at the helm. But it doesn't mean it will win many rounds in the future."