

QUESTIONS FOR JOHN WOOD

Read All About It

Interview by DEBORAH SOLOMON

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Q: You're one of several Microsoft entrepreneurs who seem eager to live out some fantasy of saving the world. As the founder of Room to Read, do you really believe you can personally "educate the world's children," as the subtitle of your forthcoming book, "Leaving Microsoft to Change the World," proclaims?



John Wood

Jason Madera

We're trying to open libraries and schools, mostly for kids K to 5, in the developing world at a pace that emulates Starbucks'. With 850 million illiterate people in the world, we need the nonprofit sector to scale rapidly.

But can libraries open as quickly as coffee bars?

In the past six years, we have established 2,500 libraries and 210 schools in Nepal, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Our model allows us to build a school with running water and toilets and a library for \$12,000 in Nepal. We can do a school in Vietnam for about \$15,000.

How can you, as a businessman and Microsoft's former head of development in China, know what books to put in a grade-school library?

We work with U.S. publishers to gain donations of English-language children's books.

Oh, I see. You're building libraries in developing countries with overstock from U.S. publishers?

Yes, and we also publish local-language children's books using indigenous authors and artists. We are finding the Dr. Seuss of Nepal.

Who will write "Green Eggs and Tofu"?

Yes, or "Green Yaks and Mountains."

Once you open a library, do you pay to hire a librarian and run it?

No, the local village pays for that. We monitor the library for the first three years. You want to go back and make sure they're not using it to house their chickens and their goats.

Does Room to Read have an endowment?

No. We have to earn our keep every day. We are not trying to create a foundation or endowment; we are trying to deploy as quickly as possible. This year our budget is \$7 million, and my paid staff is a little over 80 people.

Does the U.S. government kick in anything?

We don't seek government funding here in the U.S. We don't want to get into a fight with the U.S. government over whether we are allowed to teach kids about condoms or AIDS.

With all this travel, what is your personal life like?

I never thought I would still be renting at age 42. I am a not-married, no-kids, globe-trotting workaholic.

In your book, you fault a former girlfriend for wanting to stay at a Four Seasons Hotel. Are you allergic to pleasure?

There is no Gandhi-esque desire to starve myself. All other things being equal, I would much rather sit in the front of the plane than a middle seat in the back of the airplane.

I always think the only real advantage of being rich is not having to fly coach.

I have donors who say, "Why don't you upgrade on my miles so you can be more productive on your 15-hour flight to Katmandu?" And I take them up on it.

How nice. But do you really need donations?

What about the fabled Microsoft stock? I cashed most of it and have used it to live on. I sold it at the wrong time. I sold most of it after it had declined by 50 percent. My timing was off because you can't day-trade from the Himalayas.

Do you think you are following in Bill Gates's philanthropic footsteps?

In a way, I've got a nine-year head start on him at leaving Microsoft to devote myself to this full time. Gates is not going full time until 2008.

It's been said that all true philanthropy is done anonymously. Are you concerned that you are using charity as a vehicle for self-promotion?

I hope the book is promoting of the cause, rather than me.

It does heroicize your role in all this, complete with a picture of you on the cover, grinning as you deliver books by yak in rural Nepal.

The media loves to glom onto one person. If I wrote a book called "I'm Surrounded by the World's Most Amazing Team of Individuals," nobody would publish it.