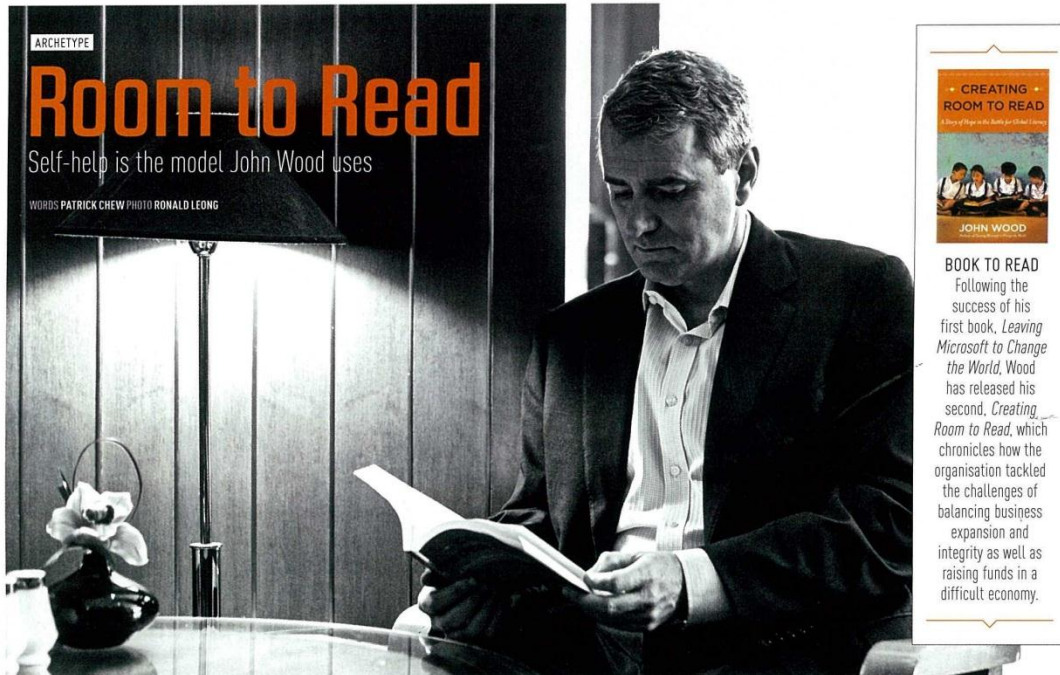


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CHARACTER



FOR SOMEONE WHO GOES ON about the unfortunate reality of people born in the wrong place at the wrong time, which he describes as "a difficult Catch-22, where people are too poor to afford education but will always remain that way if they don't get education", Wood's own personal back-story is just about the complete opposite. Wood spent his early childhood in Hartford, Connecticut, before settling in Athens, Pennsylvania. He attained a bachelor's degree at University of Colorado and an MBA from the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern, before joining Microsoft as an executive and going on to become its director of marketing for the Asia-Pacific region and director of business development for Greater China.

Then a trekking vacation in Nepal where he met a village headmaster sparked a shift in Wood's priorities and aspirations. "This headmaster had 450 children showing up every day, wanting to learn. The only problem was their library was completely empty," Wood recalls. "He said to me, 'Perhaps you, sir, will someday come back with books and help me build a library.' I went back a year later with 3,000 books on the backs on six rented donkeys. It was the biggest day in the history of the village."

It was then that Wood decided to leave Microsoft to co-found Room to Read – an organisation focused on literacy and gender equality in education. "At Microsoft, I had perks like a good salary, a car, a driver, stock options, among others, but it just suddenly felt empty. I realised that that one library was a drop in the ocean of what was needed, and I was never going to be able to do it on a large scale when I had to work 60 hours a week at Microsoft. So I just jumped out of the plane and hoped the parachute would deploy."

Room to Read has since opened 1,650 schools, built 15,000 libraries, deployed 12 million books, reaching over 7.5 million children. Wood believes this was achieved because it used a co-investment model, which encourages developing countries to help themselves. "There are too many charities who treat the developing countries as if they're passive babies and dump 50,000 used T-shirts or unload 15,000 tonnes of surplus grain on them. What good does that really do? It just makes the local people dependent on charity."

To increase the likelihood of success and long-term sustainability, Room to Read enlists community involvement by hiring strong local teams and issuing challenge grants. "We rely on our local staff because they speak the

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language and understand the local conditions to make key programmatic decisions. We also have a Challenge Grant model where villages raise a portion of the overall expenditure and provide dedicated space and labour. This promotes self-sufficiency and ensures our things are run effectively when we leave."

In the end, while Wood's vision of living in a world where children will never be told that they were born in the wrong time, place and into the wrong family seems like a tall order, he doesn't feel disheartened.

"It just means I'm going to have an active life. You can't get defocused or frustrated at the things you have not accomplished; you have to look at what you've accomplished. We open a new school every 36 hours. We open an average of six new libraries a day. If we just keep working at this week after week, month after month, that's how results happen." ☺