A HANDSHAKE AT ASYMETRIX

Thousands of articles and videos about Paul Allen highlight his many successful ventures and the boatloads of money he made with them. But it must be noted that Allen succeeded because he threw money at a lot of promising ideas, most of which disappeared, at least in their original form.

My favorite example is Asymetrix. They developed ToolBook, which was like HyperCard for Windows. HyperCard was an Apple application that broke ground in visual programming and hypermedia.

When I worked at Asymetrix in 1992, Bert Kolde ran the day to day stuff and Paul explored technology he thought was cool. It would have been called a passion project, but continuous Paul Allen funding made it seem like a business.

I didn't know any of this when I walked into their downtown Bellevue office across from the now defunct Toys 'R Us. All I knew was that I'd get a chance to make graphics and code in OpenScript too. I also didn't know that my boss would be a bully in the grand tradition of intellectual bullies made popular by Steve Jobs and Bill Gates.

After a few months it seemed to me that my bully boss survived because no one had a clear direction so the office culture got crazy and toxic. In hindsight, I think it was because Allen kept putting money into the business even if though there was little promise of making it back. This was brave and generous and sounds good, but it caused the company to exist in a nether world between being a for-profit and non-profit company.

With no meaningful measurable goals, wild west office politics took over. It made what would have been a fun job hell. Before I bailed, there was one experience that made it worth the agony. I was on an elevator by myself. A portly bearded guy in a tropical shirt stepped on. In a flash, I realized it was Paul Allen, got excited, got intimidated, and pushed past my trepidation. I turned, introduced myself, and shook his hand. His expression showed this was not the high point of his day, but it meant a lot to me.

While throwing money at a company that showed little evidence of becoming profitable didn't work well for Asymetrix, that approach worked well for Allen's sports teams. That's because sports teams have a built in goal: winning games. It's all the players and staff need to do to prove themselves. Making money is up to the business and marketing people.

Like most of us in the technology businesses in and around Seattle, I am grateful to Paul Allen for funding companies that, even if they didn't survive, gave us all opportunities to make money while learning skills we could use in other companies. By the way, I think ToolBook got sold to various companies and is now part of SumTotal Systems.

I'd love to read comments about your Paul Allen experiences.