

NEWS

The longest resumé in town

At 57, the affable Bob Fishman works to restart his career. Again.

IN THIS ARTICLE

George Ariyoshi

Person

By Prabha Natarajan
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Bob Fishman is starting up his career again.

This time, it's as an adviser to startups.

Fishman is a man who should know something about starting from scratch. He has arguably held more high-profile positions in Hawaii business and government over the past 30 years than practically anyone else, and he has also spent a lot of time reinventing himself, due to shifting political tastes or economics.

He ran the Hawaii Tourism Authority and was managing director of the City and County of Honolulu. He was an executive of Hawaiian Airlines, general manager of Aloha

Stadium, chief of staff to Gov. George Ariyoshi and, after 9/11, worked at the Pentagon.

The genial executive, who ran unsuccessfully for the Honolulu City Council two years ago, is now working with FlyHawaii Airlines and 21st Century Systems Inc., and teaches a course at the University of Hawaii.

"I look at it as new challenges all the time," Fishman said. "It's like getting the next master's degree."

At 57, Fishman says he's back in the game with renewed vigor having resumed his running and tackling a new weight-loss plan.

"I don't see myself retiring," he said.

In addition to his seven-page resume, Fishman boasts of a Rolodex that includes a who's who of Hawaii -- from former governors and mayors to military officials. He knows most on a first-name basis and keeps in touch.

Fishman, who retired as a colonel in the Army Reserve, was commissioned as the senior adviser of homeland security to the chief of the Army Reserve after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He worked at the Pentagon for 10 months, earning a top-secret security clearance, a marketable tool with companies looking to get defense contracts.

"Also, the folks I dealt with in Pentagon and Capitol Hill are the same people I have to meet and deal with for federal contracts," Fishman said.

This network of contacts and military experience helped land Fishman the position of vice president of ventures and commerce for 21st Century Systems Inc., a software developer with offices in Honolulu and on the Mainland.

The company is working on a Navy contract to develop dynamic software programs for use by military strategists and, conceivably, business executives.

As part of the job, Fishman frequently travels to Washington, D.C., and other Mainland cities. In addition to his qualifications as a frequent flier, Fishman's experience with Hawaiian Airlines, Hemmeter Aviation, Mercury Aviation and Pan-American landed him a brief stint as chief operating officer of startup airline FlyHawaii Airlines.

The airline now describes Fishman as a consultant.

"Fishman was helpful in the initial phases of airlines, primarily based on his experience in the tourism industry and at Hawaiian Airlines," said James Delano, CEO of FlyHawaii.

In between everything else, Fishman is teaching an undergraduate course in public administration at the University of Hawaii's West Oahu campus.

The 'hot zone manager'

Fishman feels there's a facet of his personality that's been untapped.

"I am good at managing company culture, engineering and fostering change within companies without a great deal of casualties," Fishman said.

"Companies make enormous investment in midlevel management and in the process of transforming a company they usually lose these people, primarily to their competitors," he said.

Fishman believes his genial and mild-mannered personality makes him a good agent for culture changes and that's one of

the reasons he has ended up with some tough spots in public administration.

"I was called the 'hot-zone manager' and thrown into situations where everything was chaos," he said.

A string of such positions included city managing director, the first CEO of the Hawaii Tourism Authority and even a stint as the city's transportation director.

But Fishman's nice-guy persona also has worked against him, with some detractors seeing him as ineffective. And with all of his job-hopping, Fishman conceded that not all of his choices were good ones.

Bumpy ride at HTA

Running the HTA presented Fishman with challenges he says he didn't expect.

"There was a lot more political interference than I expected," Fishman said.

Sen. Donna Kim, D-Halawa-Moanalua, chairwoman of the Senate Tourism Committee, constantly tangled with Fishman on HTA-related issues. Fishman says he took some of the criticism personally.

"HTA and I were her targets," he said. "She was aggressive and attended HTA meetings. It was a genuine challenge to keep people together."

Kim said she was troubled by what she saw as poor management.

"When I saw how he couldn't answer questions and was spending money like it was going out of style, I absolutely attended meetings and tried to keep them accountable," she said. "The public has every right to hold [HTA] accountable."

Kim added that the HTA board never evaluated Fishman's performance. Fishman left the job after Sept. 11, 2001, when he was activated by the Army Reserve.

"If he hadn't left, the board would have eventually fired him," Kim said.

Fishman noted that he did put together the state's first strategic plan for tourism.

For all of his high-level jobs, Fishman says he never got rich, and he is embarking on his latest career journey at a time when many of his contemporaries are looking forward to retirement.

"I am not well off but I am not poor either," he said.

Fishman continues to lead a fairly Spartan existence, driving a 12-year-old Toyota and taking a second mortgage on his Hawaii Kai home.

But compared to his early years, life is luxurious. He grew up in Chicago and Los Angeles and at 15 was forced to leave school and take a full-time job as a supervisor in a movie theater.

"It's never going to be as difficult as it was when I started," Fishman said.