

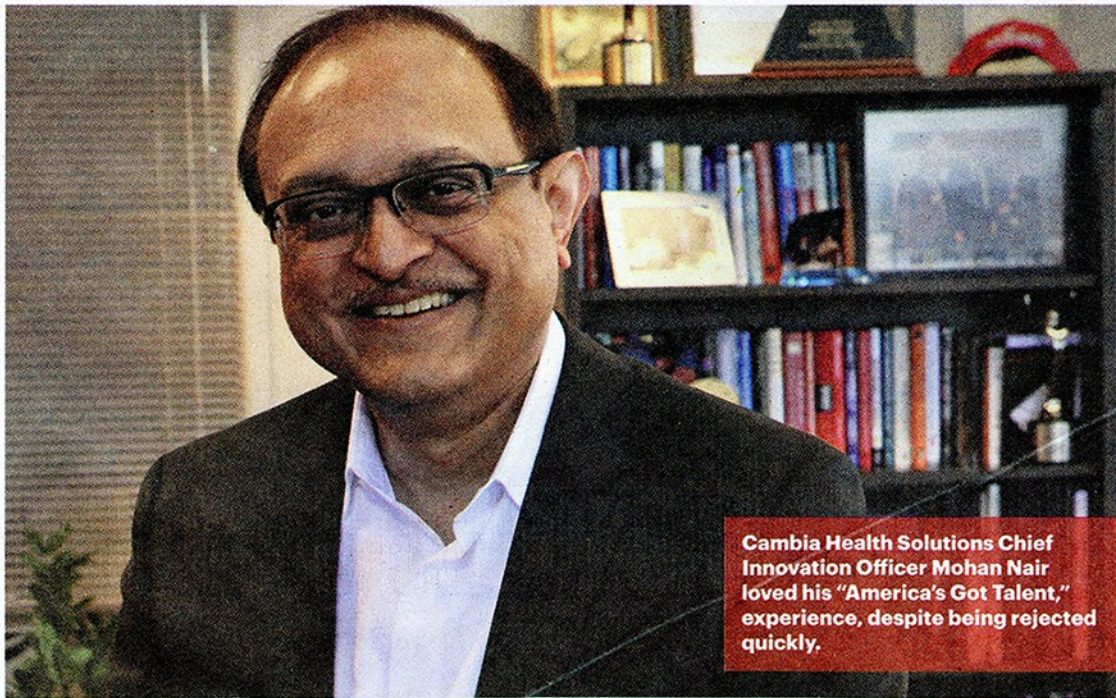
Ban the box

Readers weigh in on criminal background checks for potential employees. **OPINION, 42**



This music man loves to innovate

CAMBIA'S MOHAN NAIR ON STARTUPS, BAGPIPES AND 'AMERICA'S GOT TALENT'



Cambia Health Solutions Chief Innovation Officer Mohan Nair loved his "America's Got Talent," experience, despite being rejected quickly.

CATHY CHENEY

Mohan Nair blazed an unconventional path to the top ranks of Cambia Health Solutions.

At 18, Nair was tapped to host a talk show in prime time in his native Singapore. He then spent two years in the Singaporean military before decamping for Eugene, where he earned two degrees from the University of Oregon. Nair has lived in Oregon ever since.

Nair joined Cambia Health Solutions in 2004 as chief marketing executive. In 2011, he took on the newly created role of chief innovation officer – possibly a first for a health care company – leading the company's Innovation Force, which has spawned several startups.

He has also found time to give a TEDx talk and write articles for trade journals and several books, including "Strategic Business Transformation: The 7 Deadly Sins to Overcome."

When he's not doing health care innovation, Nair may be found playing guitar, or maybe bagpipes. He once recorded an album of original folk songs and last year auditioned for "America's Got Talent."

What was it like growing up in Singapore? Those were very formative years. They allowed me to see a nation transformed in the '50s and '60s. Those were great years to learn what it takes to grow a country. The Singapore we know today is not the Singapore I enjoyed when I was younger, but it was

MOHAN NAIR

Title: Chief Innovation Officer, Cambia Health Solutions

Background: Grew up in Singapore

Prior jobs: Chief marketing executive for Regence Group; marketing manager and software systems engineer, Intel Corp.; director of marketing, Mentor Graphics; founder Emerge venture capital and consulting; chief executive, ABC Technologies and ProTool Inc.

Education: Masters and bachelors in computer science and information science from the University of Oregon.

Extracurricular: Board member, National College of Natural Medicine; has taught business at Kellogg School of Management; served on the Oregon's Committee on Performance and Accountability.

Personal: Married, one child

an incredible experience of watching a nation-state find its differentiation and what sacrifice people had to make.

What was it like to host a live talk show at so young an age? I went to an audition and got discovered, and they gave me a talk show called "In and Around." It was live, which was scary. It was like a magazine program. It would be me and another MC interviewing people. I was scared to death. I grew up a very shy kid. Music brought the courage out.

Why learn the bagpipes? My father was sacrificed to send me to a private school. It was sort of an accidental thing, but I learned the bagpipes. I also started to pick up the guitar, and I was a watercolor painter. I did art and physics and mathematics. I was the guy who used both sides of the brain. They gave me the opportunity to explore all of that.

What was it like to audition for "America's Got Talent"? I'm proud to say I was rejected quickly. It was fun and I just wanted to feel the experience. It was a great learning experience. You have 90 seconds. You have to stand by an X, introduce yourself and sing. It was humbling. You learn to differentiate yourself in a short period of time.

How much of a hand do you have in creating the startups that have come out of the Innovation Force team? Innovation is not an individual sport. It's a value so it's a team sport. I created

the conditions whereby others can do great things. I would rarely say I spawned something. The energy of the team brings the best out of each one of us. I'm the lightning rod.

How do you do it then? The senior leaders got together and decided innovation was a value in the company. You'll see it on the walls outside. I had a tough time with that. I thought, "What does a value mean, as opposed to an objective?" When it's an objective, you find smart people, put them in a room, feed them pizza under the door and you say, "Create something." And you exclude others. When it's a value, like trust or teamwork or leadership, it's something innate in all of us. So my job as the value officer for innovation was to bring it out of every single member of our company. It's a much more challenging task and one I embraced.

Do you ever come across ideas outside of Cambia you think wish you had come up with? Uber – what a great idea.

What about health care ideas? ZoomCare was a great idea. Hopefully, they can grow it.

Now that they're in insurance, they're a competitor, right? All boats rise when you reinvent yourself. I don't think we should take a narrow view of innovation. Whoever wants to make a success of themselves, go for it.

Who inspires you as a leader? I admire Steve Jobs for his dogged focus in seeing through the fog. The greatest entrepreneurs are found in social reformers like Ghandi, like Mother Theresa. They, to me, are symbols of true entrepreneurship because they obviously spent someone else's money – that's one of the true measures of entrepreneurship. But they also built such a huge brand and symbolism toward transformation.

What is the most deadly sin in business? The one I get the most emails about because it creates the most anxiety is the company without a cause. That gets every CEO uncomfortable. They struggle with that, the idea of a purpose greater than yourself that defines your strategy. Mission statements have always been surrogates for causes. Missions are given, causes are taken. Missions are narrow. Causes are elaborative and go beyond the company to everyone in the outside world. They make you open up and say what are we standing for? Companies with causes are evident. They make people happy.

– Elizabeth Hayes, @PDXBIZLiz