

What Japanese philosophy can teach us about finding purpose in the workplace

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Published

28 June 2023

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Adapting leadership styles and organisational culture can help businesses and their employees find purpose - and have a positive impact on the world

The Great Resignation, quiet quitting, climate quitting, fury quitting. These buzzwords can elicit an eyeroll, but they reveal the unpredictable nature of the contemporary job market. Employees increasingly expect employers to make a positive economic, social and environmental impact on the world – and are [willing to walk away if they don't](#).

This is a positive trend, but how can you and your organisation find purpose in an increasingly complex market? I believe the answer lies in Japanese philosophy.

Finding *ikigai*

Outside Japan, *ikigai*, which translates as “your reason for being”, is mainly discussed in the context of personal development. I’ve set out to explore how its principles can be transferred to a business context, looking at how companies can reach a point where **they have a purpose and impact society in a positive way - without compromising business success.**

So, what does it mean to be an *ikigai* leader or even an *ikigai* organisation? According to my model and assessment tool, which look at how closely leadership styles and organisational cultures align with the philosophy, the following four characteristics should be integrated at the same time:

1. **What you are good at:** knowhow, capabilities, skills, talent
2. **What you love to do:** passion, motivation
3. **What the world needs:** positive social and environmental impact, sustainability, corporate responsibility
4. **What you need for the market:** business acumen, understanding the market forces

Only when all four are incorporated into business life, **both for individuals and collectively**, can *ikigai* be reached.

This model has already been applied in the [Leonardo Centre on Business for Society](#) and Imperial College [Executive Education’s Sustainability Leadership programme](#), which was [awarded a prize by the Financial Times](#), Imperial’s [Global Online MBA](#) programme, and several leadership workshops and wellness programmes.

Value alignment matters more than ever before

Employees are no longer driven solely by financial motives. According to [Deloitte](#), Gen Z employees value salary less than any other generation; given the choice of a boring job with a high salary or a more interesting role that doesn’t pay as well, Gen Z is fairly evenly split. Reflecting on the *ikigai* model can help employees better understand where they want to go and whether their organisation is helping them to achieve it, providing a valuable anchor when considering a career move.

Getting closer to a corporate culture based on a united purpose creates a more aligned team. This is all the more important when you consider Gen Z will

account [for 27 per cent of the workforce by 2025](#). If businesses want to attract and retain a new generation of talent, they need to demonstrate their commitment to people and the planet through concrete action.

Quitting isn't always the answer

Often employees discover they can find a sense of purpose in the workplace by changing their organisation themselves. One Imperial Global Online MBA student said: "For me, the introduction of the concept of *ikigai* was ground-breaking. For so long, I had chosen to look away and ignore how empty I felt. Today... I am finding purpose right where I am, I understand now that I have full control over my perspective. I am initiating projects at work that bring out my creativity and passion rather than waiting for an opportunity to simply arrive."

Deciding to make changes to your organisation requires bravery, and for there to be a chance of success, the answers to the following questions should be "Yes":

- Do I have enough motivation and passion to do it?
- Does it energise me?
- Is it good for the world?
- Will the company survive?

Identifying the missing piece in your organisation

At an organisational level, ***ikigai* can provide a guiding light, help you to identify where you need to make changes and what is missing**, whether it's the business model, staffing, organisational structure, vision or the mission. Finding the purpose of the organisation, ensuring staff love what they do and are good at it, needs to be balanced with what the market needs to ensure the business remains profitable and can survive.

So far, only one of the more than 200 organisations that underwent an assessment has achieved an *ikigai* business model. [AimHi](#) provides accessible and engaging online climate training and education, with the aim of empowering everyone to be part of the fight against climate change. What sets the business apart is its passion for making the world a better place coupled with its ability to read and understand the market well.

The first *ikigai* organisation being a sustainability startup corroborates my original hypothesis: smaller and younger organisations are likely to come closest to achieving *ikigai*. This seems to be because it's easier to set up new structures from scratch, while changing an existing organisational culture is possible but requires a longer process.

The search for other *ikigai* corporations is still on, but my goal is to use this model to help change the way we think about work – both from a leadership, as well as from a corporate cultural perspective – to make finding purpose a reality in business all over the world.

This article draws on “[IKIGAI for Leaders and Organisations: The Way to Individual and Collective Purpose and Meaning](#)” by Frank Brueck (Imperial College London)

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Frank Brueck is the Leadership Lab Lead at Imperial Business School's Leonardo Centre on Business for Society.

He developed the concept of the ikigai corporation and is an experienced consultant, trainer, lecturer and researcher in the fields of corporate social responsibility, sustainability, business and leadership development, as well as intercultural management.

Read [Frank's Imperial Profile](#) for more information and publications.

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This 5 day on-campus Sustainability Strategies programme in London is designed for mid to senior-level managers who are accountable for or aspire to create and implement sustainable business strategies.

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