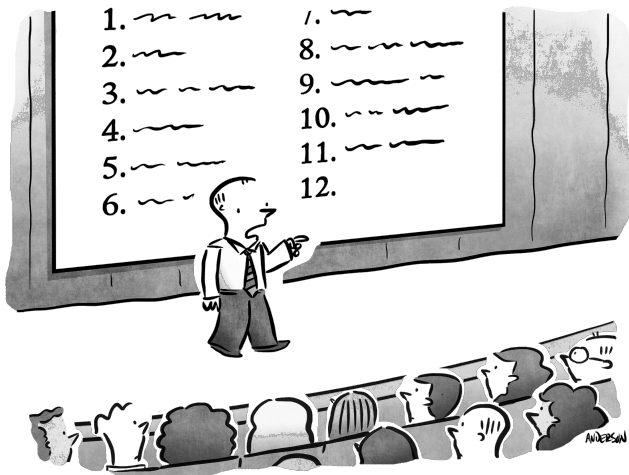


Finding Fulfillment

by Jason Cohen on December 25, 2022

What creates a fulfilling existence? Exploration leads to a framework I've used for years for myself and the people around me. I hope it helps you too.



"Now the twelfth and final thing you can completely change right now to be your true self..."

Many blogs, resulting in book deals, resulting in speaking careers, have been forged by taking a swing at a basic human question:

What creates a fulfilling existence?

Managers desperately ask, forced by the Great Resignation to acknowledge that people are more mobile than expected when sufficiently (un)motivated¹. Enlightened leaders ask proactively, because intrinsically-motivated people do great work that is just as fulfilling for themselves as it is productive for the company—capitalism on its best day. Outwardly-impenetrable leaders ask it of themselves to conquer burn-out or to decide what to do with the balance of life that follows the societal definition of "success."

¹ Your best talent are volunteers—they can always walk across the (now virtual) street for more money, because they're worth it, and because their resume has been incrementally improved by the experience at your company. You may protest that the grass isn't greener over there, but rather their feelings arise from the modern malaise instigated by COVID-imposed isolation from genuine relationships and the vile so-called online "relationships" fueled by toxic politics. You might even be right, but it's too late.

What follows is my original framework I used to answer this question for myself ten years ago when I made the decision to step aside as CEO of the (now unicorn) company I founded. I still use it myself and recommend it to others.

First, some of the best prior art on the topic.

Pink's Motivation: Autonomy, Mastery, Purpose

Daniel Pink famously surmised² that "carrots and sticks" are poor motivators for most people. Worse, they're demonstrably counter-productive in common real-world scenarios. Instead of external motivators, blatantly designed for the benefit of the organization rather than the individual, people prefer—people *deserve*—to be driven by internal motivation, aligned with genuine personal fulfillment.

² in [his book](#), though you might prefer to watch his [extremely popular TED talk](#)

My subjective experience confirms this science-backed insight. The best people don't have to settle for anything less than personal fulfillment at work, as evidenced by the Great Resignation. And anyway it results in an organization that we are all proud to build.

Pink suggests that internal motivation arises under three conditions:

Autonomy

People are fulfilled when they decide what to do and how to do it. Counter-examples include micro-management, inflexible working conditions, and one-way command-and-control structures. Positive examples include self-managed scrum teams, work-from-anywhere-and-when-ever schedules, and agreeing on the goals of the final product rather than dictating the details of what that product is and how it must be created.

Mastery

Great people want the opportunity to do great work. They want to be around other people who are doing the same. Experts enjoy deploying their expertise; novices with vim and aptitude enjoy learning and growing.

Purpose

As the janitor famously answered in 1962 when president Kennedy asked him what he did for NASA, “I’m helping put a man on the moon.” Everyone—not just Gen Z—wants to be a part of something bigger than themselves. That could be a noble cause, or something more incremental but tangible, like genuinely helping another human being in their own endeavors, as one might do in a world-class customer service organization.

Other work agrees with and extends these ideas³. However, I believe that to leap from Pink’s original question—*What motivates people?*—to my question—*What is fulfilling?*—at least one vital component is missing: **Joy**.

³ For example, [Self-Determination Theory](#) asserts that motivation arises from “autonomy, competence, and relatedness”—essentially the same thing.

生き甲斐: A reason to be alive

For thousands of years the Japanese have revered those who devote their lives to the mastering of a craft, having “craftsman spirit” 職人氣質 (shokunin kishitsu). The samurai and the flower-arranger hold equal value, the

chef and the janitor hold equal prestige, when each are whole-hearted in their endeavors. Furthermore, world-class skill is only half of the meaning of being a shokunin; you must also play a mindful and intentional role in bettering the community.

It is not only “Mastery” but also “Purpose.” The Japanese have venerated 2/3rds of Pink’s trifecta for millennia.

An equally ancient concept, that received a direct name in the 1960s, is 生き甲斐 (ikigai)—a motivating force that gives someone a reason for living:

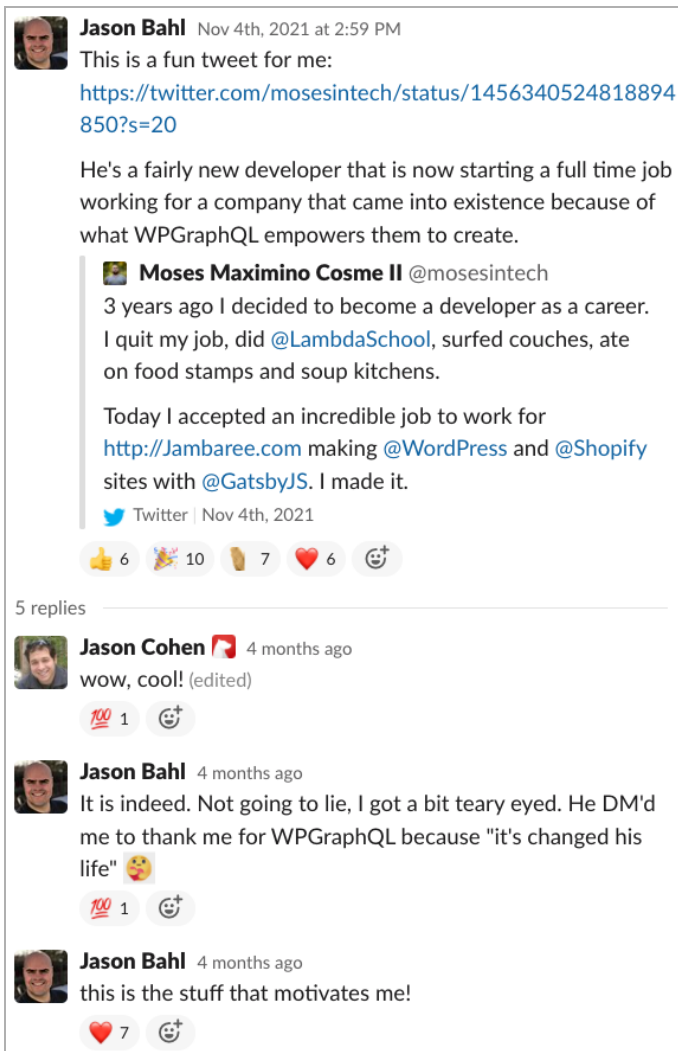
... ikigai ... usually means the feeling of accomplishment and fulfillment that follows when people pursue their passions. Activities that generate the feeling of ikigai are not forced on an individual; they are perceived as being spontaneous and undertaken willingly, and thus are personal and depend on a person’s inner self. ([Wikipedia](#))

This brings color to the idea of intrinsic motivation as well as that of extrinsic purpose. Furthermore, it’s not an exaggeration to say that this is a reason to go on living at all:

[National Geographic](#) reporter [Dan Buettner](#) suggested ikigai may be one of the reasons for the longevity of the people of Okinawa. According to Buettner, Okinawans have less desire to retire, as people continue to do their favourite job as long as they remain healthy. “Moai”, the close-knit friend group, is considered an important reason for the people of Okinawa to live long. In 2016, [Héctor García and Francesc Miralles published] a book based on this concept: *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*. ([Wikipedia](#))

We need purpose, whether it’s the Silicon Valley notion of “changing the world” or to be a great-grand-parent. To be useful, to be needed, even to be wanted, one person to another, is already a higher purpose.

One person at a time, can be all it takes, as in this serendipitous Slack exchange I had with [WPGraphQL](#) founder [Jason Bahl](#):



(reprinted with permission)

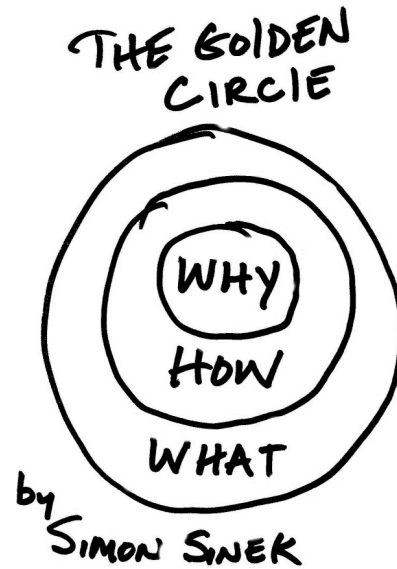
A “higher purpose” might elicit an eye-roll from the skeptic, but it turns out to be useful even if you’re a cold-blooded, mercenary, even authoritarian-style leader.

Sinek’s Fanaticism: Start with why

Simon Sinek wanted to know why some organizations produce fanatics. Not just customers and employees, not just people who like and buy the products, but people who personally identify with the company, incorporating the company’s brand into their personal brand. When competitors build something objectively better, they don’t switch, because for them it’s not just about the features and the price. They’d work for that company if they

could, and many do. As a result, employee turnover is low and productivity is high. Therefore every aspect of the business is stronger. How does this arise?

Sinek sums up the answer: These companies **Start with “Why.”** Meaning: These organizations have clear, simple, compelling *raison d’être*, a reason for being, something they stand for, something they would never contravene with their actions, even if it hurts sales or profitability.



It could be a “higher purpose,” like Patagonia’s incontrovertible mission to save the Earth⁴, or SpaceX’s mission to make humanity a multi-planetary species, or the Gates Foundation project to save millions of lives by eradicating malaria.

⁴ Beyond the obvious—sustainable practices, an outdoor-working culture—they have a formal company policy to bail employees out of jail if arrested while protesting peacefully.

But it doesn’t have to be grandiose or holy to be motivating. Sinek frequently returns to the example of Apple’s “Think Different” campaign; this taps the personal brand of those who are (or want to be seen as) independently-minded, creative, creators, iconoclasts, and artists, including artists embedded in fields like software development and engineering. Or Salesforce with its “1-1-1” or WP Engine with its “Engine for Good”—thoughtful, sys-

tematic ways of giving back to the communities they are a part of (without pretending to single-handedly “change the world”). Or Rackspace with their “fanatical support,” transforming the traditional status of Customer Service from a begrudged cost-center hell-bent on cost-reduction, elevating it instead into the honor of serving others, and a critical product differentiator in a market that is otherwise commoditized.

“*When people are financially invested, they want a return. When people are emotionally invested, they want to contribute.*”

—Simon Sinek

All of these companies were created by and are still run by Gen-X-and-older. So, wanting a higher purpose isn’t just “a Gen Z thing,” though clearly younger generations do, on average, talk about this more, and more conscientiously. In any case, the freshest talent and the future leaders of the world are Gen Z, so even a leader unsympathetic to “causes” should realize that having a higher purpose is more useful than not having one.

This confirms and clarifies the “Purpose” component of the Pink Trifecta. Sinek approached it from an analysis of fanaticism and loyalty to organizations, and arrived at the same place.

Cohen’s Circles & Traps: Joy, Skill, Need

It is possible to be empowered to work how you want (Autonomy), to be leveraging your skills and expertise (Mastery), and to be proud of your role in a cause (Purpose / Why), and yet *still dislike every day of your existence*. More than contentment (ikigai), you need *Joy*.

Not only is this possible, it is common. There’s the classic example of the startup founder who wakes up six years into the journey, realizing she’s been surreptitiously

brought to a boil, burned out, dreading each day, drinking too much “to turn my brain off so I can sleep” but actually because she’s deeply unhappy:

Each morning for the past couple months, my first thought has been “What could today be like if I didn’t work here?” I drift off into exploring what it would be like to work at WalMart, or the construction site outside, or as a bagger at a grocery store. It seems so stress free. This morning, I locked myself in the bathroom with the shower running (don’t want wife to know) and cried my eyes out. I haven’t cried in many years. It felt great, but only for an hour.

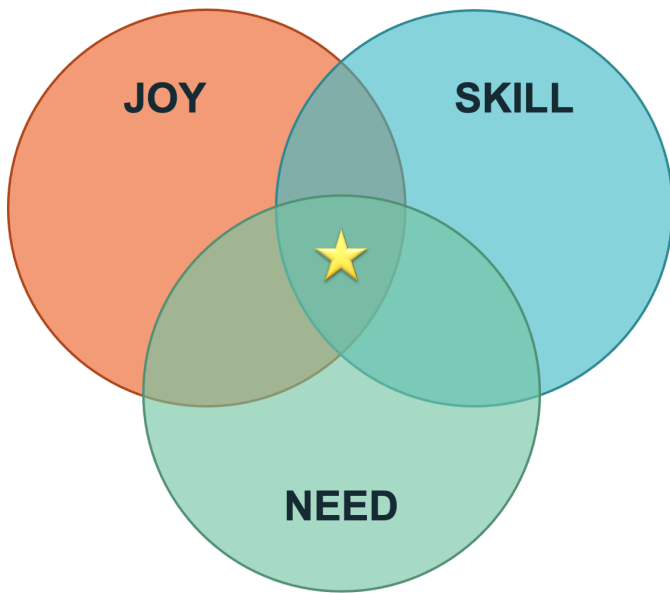
—Anonymous founder

Eight years ago I created my own framework for understanding how I could avoid this burn-out trap at WP Engine⁵, especially when making decisions that are contrary to ego. The ego says “Being the CEO is the best.” Silicon Valley says “The founder being the CEO is the Only Way⁶.” So it’s hard to convince the ego to let go of being the CEO, as I did at WP Engine, even if being the CEO creates unhappiness.

⁵ Whereas I did burn out at my previous company Smart Bear. Even selling the business didn’t immediately fix the problem, although it was the beginning of the answer.

⁶ Typically citing Apple, Facebook, and Amazon while ignoring counter-examples like Google, LinkedIn, and Intel, although there do exist thoughtful arguments that embrace those exceptions.

Here’s the insight: Not only do you need *all three* of the following components, but any two alone create a specific trap:



Someday I'll make a Venn diagram where "the middle" isn't the answer, but today is not that day.

Joy

You love doing it. When you do it all day, you forget to eat and pee. At the end of a long day of doing it, you still want to do it.

Skill

You're great at it. Your work is so good, even *you* are proud of it. It stands out, and others notice. Those who don't understand how much effort you expended say: "You're a natural."

Need

The company needs it done. It's a top-three priority. Doing it well means a critical part of your strategy will succeed. Not doing it is crippling.

Having any two without the third creates a well-defined yet common trap. It's instructive to understand the traps, because it can *feel good* to be in the trap:

Trap: Joy + Skill – Need = Useless Flow

At the intersection of Joy and Skill is "being in the zone," a.k.a. Flow⁷. Wonderful! Unless you're working on something the company doesn't need done. Being in flow is intoxicating, and does "recharge the batteries," but it's unproductive. Continuing the example of the burned-out founder living in this trap, there's no

one willing or able to tell you to your face that you're not contributing to what the company needs, so you stay in your happy place. A classic example is the technical founder writing code instead of making sales, fixing the website, handling the accounting, or hiring the next great team member.

⁷ Flow is when a person is fully immersed in an activity for an extended period of time. Time passes unwittingly, performance is at maximum, and it is universally described as pleasurable.

Trap: Joy + Need – Skill = Indulgent Failure

The company needs to begin advertising. You've never done AdWords before, but you always wanted to try it, and anyway it'd be fun to learn something new. You might hire someone to do it later, but not now, because how do you hire and manage someone else without understanding the job yourself? So you make the AdWords campaigns. And since you're unskilled at both marketing and AdWords, you waste three months. You might even erroneously conclude "AdWords doesn't work" because that's an easier conclusion than "I don't know what I'm doing." If the company needed advertising so badly, you did a disservice to the company by indulging your desire to "play with it," because now months have passed without accomplishing what needed to be done. You tell yourself that *now* you can hire that person, because three months of flailing somehow makes you an "expert." As founder, no one will contradict you, so you indulge, and the company falls that much further behind.

Trap: Skill + Need – Joy = Burn-out

This is classic burn-out. When you do the work all day, you feel drained and exhausted rather than energized (as you would if it were Flow = Skill + Joy). You do the work, because the company needs it done. You do the work, because you are undeniably great at it. Even though you hate doing it, you'd rather take it on yourself rather than foist it on others, whether because you want to "protect them from the drudgery⁸," or because you believe they can't do as good a job as you can, or because you can't afford to hire someone. Because you

create great results that the company needs, it doesn't look like a problem—not to you, nor your team. But because you dislike it, you grow to resent it, and eventually you can't face it, and you're finished. Many startup founders agree.

⁸ No one wants the boss doing all the drudgery, especially if the boss visibly hates doing it. Some people actually *like* the thing you hate, and you're preventing them—and you—from being happier.

I created and used this framework nearly a decade ago, to recognize the wisdom of changing roles from the CEO of the company I founded (WP Engine) to the CTO, so that both our new CEO and I could operate in the center of our Venn diagrams. The thousands of people who have since worked at our company concur that this was a fantastic decision, both personally for the two of us, and for the success of the business, which is now a unicorn and an iconic landmark in Austin, Texas.



Co-winning E&Y's Central Texas Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2017 with our inimitable CEO Heather Brunner, who I frequently refer to as "the founder who joined three years in." Copying how Reid Hoffman describes Jeff Weiner at LinkedIn, it is neither an exaggeration nor unearned appellation.

This framework is not a replacement of Pink's model; it is compatible. It adds the missing "Joy" component, while reinforcing "Mastery" with the label of "Skill." It lacks "Autonomy," however, perhaps because I created it with the founder in mind—a person who definitionally possesses autonomy, even to their detriment. "Need" is more tactical than "Purpose," really about being *useful*.

Therefore, my recommendation is to identify that higher purpose, as described by "Start with Why" or *ikigai*, and fulfill your own part in that purpose at the center of the three circles.

When we intentionally create a work environment where others have a chance at fulfillment, we're already improving the world substantially. When we care enough about others to find out what fulfills them, we can help that materialize. When we're closer to our own center of fulfillment, we can better serve others.

Easier said than done, but do it you must.

How to find your circles of "Joy" and "Skill"

"Know thyself"⁹ is easier said than done, so here's some help in actually executing on this framework.

⁹ Inscribed at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, independently opined by many people throughout history, Thales gave this as the answer to the question: What is the most difficult thing? When asked what is the easiest thing, he answered: To give advice. Which is what I do in these articles. The truth hurts!

Here's some prompts to get you started:

- Even when I was a kid, I would _____, and I still find myself drawn to it.
- Lately I find that I love it whenever _____, which would surprise my ten-years-ago self.
- If I could go back in time, I would tell myself to worry less about _____ and more about _____.
- When I'm on an extended vacation, I get itchy to _____; I just can't help it.

- My parents/friends always laugh when I start talking about _____ because I get so excited I can't stop talking about it.
- My parents always said I would be a _____ because even when I was three years old...
- Whenever I _____, I get lost in the work, and feel energized (not exhausted!) when the work ends.
- If I could go (back to) college, I would get a degree in _____.
- The last project I *really* enjoyed, and would totally go back and keep working on, was _____.
- I was surprised how much my peers praised my work when I _____; maybe I'm better at that than I thought.
- Recently I was totally immersed, engaged, excited, and happy while doing _____.
- I asked a few people who know me, and who I trust to be thoughtful and observant, and they said my special strengths are _____.

Just as useful are anti-examples. Sometimes it's easier to avoid something you hate, then to construct a situation where you're constantly doing something you love:

- I have an intense dread of any meeting where we _____.
- The last time I had to _____, I did an embarrassingly minimal job, because I couldn't bring myself to do better.
- If my job starts requiring me to _____ with even 10% of my time, I would at least think about changing jobs.
- When I'm faced with _____ I physically feel the "pit of my stomach" falling.
- When I'm faced with _____ I procrastinate even to do chores that I dislike and would normally avoid.
- If I'm being honest, although I would really love to be great at _____, the fact is I'm just never going to be good at it.
- Whenever I _____ all day long, I know I do great work, but I'm absolutely exhausted; the rest of the night will be vegging out of the sofa with mindless

entertainment.

- I know I'm supposed to like / do _____, but the truth is I can never get excited about it.

You should be honest, even if you think "society" wouldn't like your answers. There's nothing wrong with the drive to make money, or to become famous, or to prove a point.

Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc., etc. It is humbug to pretend this is not a motive, and a strong one. Writers share this characteristic with scientists, artists, politicians, lawyers, soldiers, successful businessmen—in short, with the whole top crust of humanity.

—George Orwell, *Why I Write*

The best scenario is when you are doing your calling. As Tim Ferris describes it, when anyone asks him whether they ought to write a book:

If the rewards are 1/4 of what you think they will be, and it takes 2x longer than you think it will take, is it still a *no-brainer* to do it? Not just "good" but a "no-brainer," like you almost have to do it?

A final note on "Skill"—there is the skill you already have, but there is also the skill you *aspire* to have, that you're *excited* to develop.

“*I am always doing that which I can not do, in order that I may learn how to do it.*”

—Vincent van Gogh

This is useful to highlight, because learning is often fulfilling. The healthiest work environment is where your existing skills help you succeed at the nominal job description (so you're operating from a position of strength), and where the job permits or even encourages your learning in the direction you want to develop (incurring the costs of learning, such as work taking longer than it ought to and making avoidable mistakes).

I wish you luck on your journey!

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