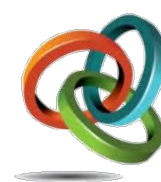




*Living and learning on a
Spanish eco-farm*

Journal of the Association for
Management Education and
Development



amed

developing people
developing organisations



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Cover image: Early morning view in rural Andalucia.
Photo: Alison Piasecka

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Off the grid: finding Ikigai

Tim Whitworth



Up the ridge as the sun rises, the black droppings on the track, already attracting flies, slimy but of a vegetarian – wild goat perhaps?

The whole site viewed for the first time, stretching up the valley, the houses and buildings barely visible – off the grid – not on the map – no address – not visible – unknown - but so real. The house very present but unseen.

The warmth of early summer sun in a cool morning.

Returning – to Ikigai

Tim peeling potatoes, La Burra Verde, OST2018. Photo by Alison Piasecka

Switching off ... and on

Of many memories of OST 2018, the one that stays uppermost in my mind is the absolute shock and difference in this experience compared to any other sharing/ learning or indeed holiday I had encountered. Driving into the mountains from Orgiva, surprisingly populated by hippies, to a tiny dusty hamlet with more cars than houses was the first sign of difference. With snow still on the Alpujarras peaks, the long walk to La Burra Verde alongside olive groves and ancient water channels was a hint of things to come.

This place is off the grid – in every way – and doesn't show up on maps, has no mains electricity or water. One might think that here you'd be unaffected by any of the turmoil in European politics, mass migration and disruption and war or environmental changes. So, the venue was likely to generate different responses if not reactions.



View of La Burra Verde from the mountain, OST2018.
Photo by Tim Whitworth

The knowledge that I would be challenged by a mostly vegan diet along with compost loos and communal living with a group, few of whom I knew, would be nothing if not a new experience!



Non-electric washing machine, La Burra Verde, OST2018. Photo by Tim Whitworth

Encountering diversity

The diversity of the group was another surprise, not that I didn't know in advance that there would be young people and some older rather like me. However, we were all there to see what we could experience together, learn from each other and share in this extraordinary place with varying degrees of anticipation, openness and anxiety.

I really think that this combination allowed or caused me to think and experience differently. Getting used to a different rhythm and timing – everywhere on the site took longer to reach than I was used to or expected – was a far stretch from the beautiful, comfortable and organised venues that I use in my (corporate) work elsewhere. And the converted donkey stable that was my shared bedroom and the walk to one sort of outside loo or another was just fine, once I'd adjusted to all of this.



Door to La Casa Parra, where Tim stayed, La Burra Verde OST2018. Photo by Alison Piasecka.

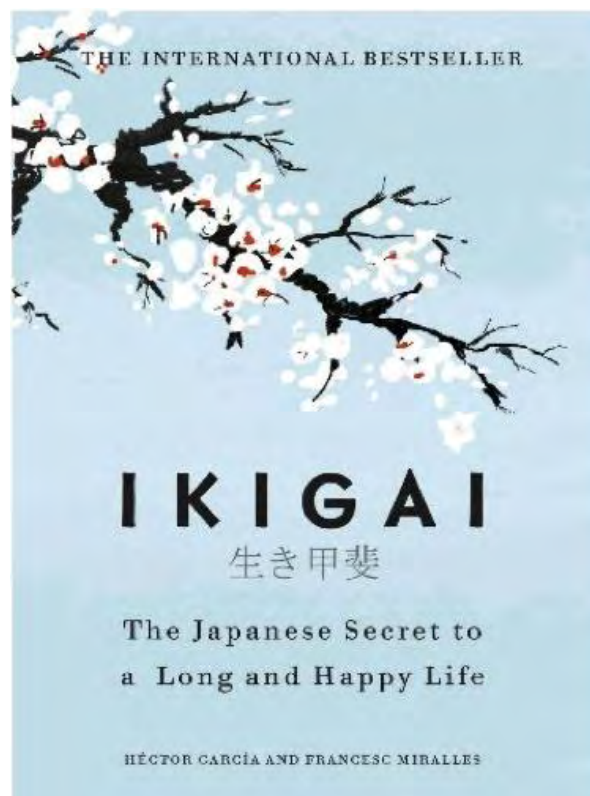
Living longer – and better?

I wanted to share with the group a recent discovery based on my own realisation that I might be living, with luck, rather longer than I had previously expected and that I might also be working many years more than my own parents or that I had planned or hoped. A book recommended to me last year (Ikigai, Garcia & Miralles 2017) served as an introduction to a rethinking in this way: if I am or have to work to a greater age, what do I need to do make this rewarding and enjoyable and how can I avoid the horrors of old age, poor health, dementia and a sense of being past it.

Whilst this may sound like Peter Pan, it is not this that occupies my mind. What does is that, if I am likely to live over 100 and still feel a useful member of the human race, what do I need to do to be able to enjoy this as much as possible? And what does it tell me and others about how we might live our lives differently? The idea of rushing at life, working hard like crazy to 65 or so, and then moving into retirement (endless travel and holidays if well pensioned; not a lot if not) for another 40 years or more no longer makes the same sense. I add that to the knowledge that I am part of the first generation in which the job for life began to disappear and I'm now looking at the millennials with their freelance futures, zero hours contracts and little future job security.

The Ikigai way

OST2018 participants had opportunities to share some of their ideas through facilitating occasional group sessions. I elected to introduce the Ikigai process. For various reasons my session was retimed and reshaped to cram this exploration into a mere hour as the very last themed morning session of the Bayacas gathering. The facilitation was gratefully shared (thank you Andy), making links to some of the other work we had undertaken at Bayacas, and was attended by the whole group, with the exception of Jill, who was preparing our lunch. It offered the potential for very different experiences for the broad age range represented in the room.



[Ikigai - Penguin Books](#)

Ikigai – a summary

Implications of longer life expectancy

Research tells us that we are in a phase in history that is likely to see (much) longer life spans in our developed economy, due to a combination of better diet, relative lack of death through war and improved knowledge and techniques in health care. We also know that for some, longer life carries with it the possibility of many years of relative inactivity, whether because of societal changes in family/ community living, or poor health such as infirmity, dementia and other debilitating diseases of the brain. So, a reasonable aspiration for this longer life may include wishing to continue to be a useful member of society (and maybe family). But most of all we want to be healthy and able to enjoy what we can.

Lessons from other societies

What can we learn from other societies around the world that helps with this? We can look to the five blue zones. According to Beuttner (2015), blue zones are places sustaining the conditions that seem to foster healthy, productive and rewarding lifestyles into old age. For Beuttner, the five best known and documented blue zones are Sardinia, Loma Lima in California, Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica. Ikaria in Greece and [Okinawa](#) in Japan. Okinawa is reputed to be the island with the most centenarians in the world.

Whilst many of the blue zones are islands, there is a much bigger point, which concerns the rapidly shifting age demographic across the entire developed world. For example, a piece in [The Guardian](#) (14/9/18) focuses on *the whole of Japan*, and makes reference to Switzerland and Australia as well. It includes

this picture of *Respect for the Aged Day*, and – elsewhere – reports the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, as saying that:

'The key to Japan's sustainable growth is how we respond to the ageing of the population, which is the biggest challenge to Abeconomics'.

People exercise during an event marking Respect for the Aged Day in Tokyo, Japan.

[The Guardian: 14 Sep 2018](#)

Photograph: Franck Robichon/EPA

Japanese centenarian population edges towards 70,000

Number of people aged 100 or older reaches record high, with women making up 88% of total



▲ People exercise during an event marking Respect for the Aged Day in Tokyo, Japan. Photograph: Franck Robichon/EPA

Characteristics of blue zones

Research tells us that blue zones share four common characteristics: their people have in common:

1. A healthy diet e.g. little processed food or meat and eating until 80% full
2. Regular exercise
3. Strong social ties – connected for life – with bonds (*Moya* is an informal group of people with common interests who look out for one or another) and feelings of mutual and identity
4. *Ikigai*

Of these characteristics, the first two – a healthy diet and regular exercise - are fairly obvious and have been the focus for health prevention campaigns in many countries for many years. More surprising perhaps are the social and mental characteristics - what gives us resilience, place and purpose. This comes as a shock to a western society where many of us have turned away from extended family life and the ties into organised community or religious life. More striking, though, is what each of us seeks and finds in believing that there is purpose in our (hopefully) long lives

Ikigai

And then there is *Ikigai*. Put simply, *Ikigai* is what gets us up in the morning. According to the Japanese, everyone has an *Ikigai*, a *raison d'être*, even if we haven't all found it yet. In Okinawa, few people actually stop working; rather, their work changes, their place as an elder in society is valued, giving purpose to their life.

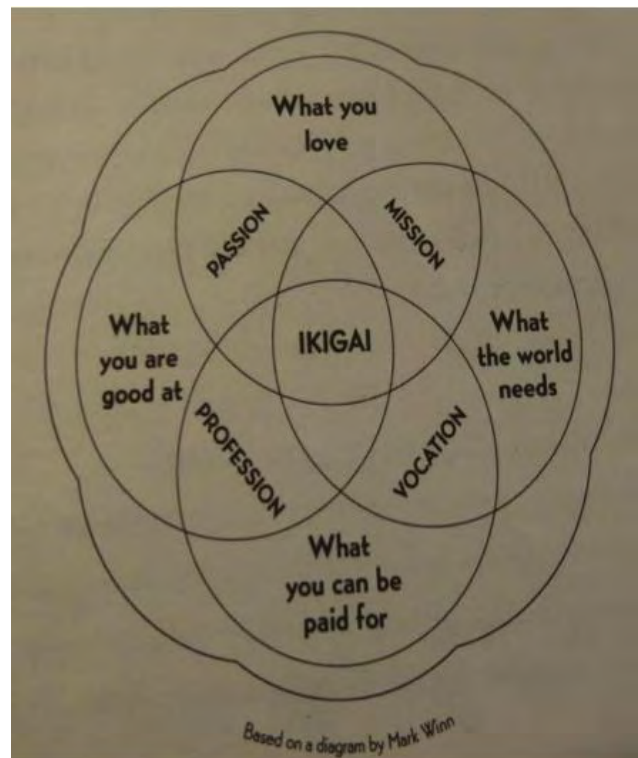
Contemplating Ikigai raises a number of important questions:

1. Have we got things in place for good diet and regular exercise to prolong healthy life?
2. If Moia (social bonds) are important, how much effort have we and are we putting into ours? Not just when we need it in older age, but in younger life as well.
3. How can I help myself and others be valued and feel worthwhile as I get ever older?

... essentially ... do I know what my Ikigai is?

The drawing shown here was the basis of how each of us at OST2018 questioned, thought and talked about what makes up our own Ikigai.

Fig 1: Contemplating Ikigai, Mark Winn



10 principles we distilled at Bayacas

The work around Ikigai produces 10 principles that can help us in achieving these characteristics. I've simplified them here in summary:

1. Stay active, don't retire
2. Take it slow
3. Don't fill your stomach
4. Surround yourself with good friends
5. Get in shape – maintenance and movement
6. Smile
7. Reconnect with nature
8. Give thanks (daily)
9. Live in the moment
10. Follow your Ikigai

Some reflections on OST2018

Whilst OST 2018 at Bayacas met some of these 'classic' characteristics, including an unusual environment, it was clear to me that making and maintaining good friendships is a good start. We can all test ourselves on how we measure up against the components of Ikigai, and work towards the others. And, if we are going to live longer, does this suggest that the linear approach to working life, starting after college and carrying on flat out until 'retirement' is really necessary? Perhaps Ikigai gives us permission to alternate between going fast and going slow throughout our whole lives, to stop work, explore, rediscover. And, through this, we may empower ourselves to change our own rhythm and place on the planet, and in community and family alike?

About Tim

Tim is a systems enabler, working on small- and large-scale change projects across agencies in the public sector. A qualified executive coach, sometime accountant and chief officer, he facilitates leadership and organisational development programmes as well as a long running community for bereaved dads.

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