

Finding Your Ikigai

Meaning

Exercise

30-60 min

Client

No

Finding purpose in life is one of the most fundamental human needs. By our very nature, we seek meaning and validation of our place in the grand scheme of things. Throughout the annals of history, philosophers, psychologists, and laypeople alike have been perpetually debating the meaning of life. Meaning is a multidimensional construct comprised of comprehension (feeling as though one's life makes sense), purpose (feeling directed and motivated by valued goals), and mattering (feeling that one's existence is significant) (George & Park, 2016). Meaning is a robust predictor of psychological health, physiological health, and general wellbeing. Indeed, research suggests that a high sense of purpose is associated with a reduced risk of all-cause mortality, higher daily positive affect, lower daily negative affect, and improved longevity across diverse cultures, genders, and age groups (Cohen, Bavishi, & Rozanski, 2016).

In Japanese culture, to find meaning and purpose in life is to find one's *ikigai* (ee-key-guy). While no definitive translation exists, *ikigai*, which is a combination of the Japanese words *ikiru*, meaning "to live," and *kai*, meaning "the realization of what one hopes for," can be understood as a reason for being, or that which makes life worth living.

Research suggests that having *ikigai* facilitates the integration of stressful psychological events from the past, present, and future with less conflict or confusion (Ishida & Okada, 2011). This ability results in decreased anxiety and lower levels of sympathetic nervous system activity during psychological and physically stressful situations (Ishida, 2008). Further, *ikigai* has been shown to influence immune function and increase life expectancy (Hui & Fung, 2009), reduce anxiety and improve resilience (Ishida, 2008), act as an intermediary between flow experience and sense of coherence (Iida & Oguma, 2013), and enhance self-esteem and acceptance of adversity (Kamiya, 2004), amongst many other favorable outcomes.

Having *ikigai* means that each day is infused with meaning and reflects not only psychological factors, such as wellbeing, hopes, and dreams but also an individual's consciousness of their motivation for a living (Sone et al., 2008). The discovery of one's *ikigai* is attainable with patience, commitment, and introspective exploration. While the concept is decidedly personal and specific to the individual, *ikigai* is consistently found at the convergence of four fundamental elements, namely, passion (what you love), mission (what the world needs), vocation (what you are good at), and profession (what you can get paid for) (Garcia, Miralles, & Cleary, 2017).



Author

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Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients find purpose and meaning in their lives by engaging in the Japanese practice of ikigai. In doing so, clients can explore and connect with what is most meaningful by discovering the point at which their passions and talents converge with what others need and are willing to pay for.



Advice

- Finding one's ikigai requires a commitment to action and is not likely to be discovered overnight. For some clients, ikigai might be obvious, while others might continue to search for their purpose for some time, trying to determine what it is they value the most. Clients should be made aware that finding their ikigai is something that will unfold over time and change as various aspects of their own lives change. In other words, finding one's ikigai is about lifelong self-reflection and experimentation.
- Clients should carefully consider each of the four circles and allow themselves ample time to respond to the central question of each circle. It is also essential that clients answer honestly, writing down whatever comes to mind at the moment. Clients who have difficulty answering any of the questions should refer to the list of prompts provided in Appendix A. While ikigai is deeply personal to the individual, this may serve as a springboard or source of inspiration for some clients.
- There is value to be found in any overlapping responses to the four questions. Overlapping answers can be interpreted as:
 - The things that you love and that you are also good at = *Passion*
 - The things that the world needs and that you also love = *Mission*
 - The things that you can be paid for and also that the world needs = *Vocation*
 - The things that you're good at and also what you can be paid for = *Profession*
- Clients should be aware of any overlapping answers as they will provide clarity on other aspects of their life and, therefore, lead them closer to discovering their ikigai. An example of a completed ikigai chart can be found in Appendix B.
- Clients should positively frame their responses to the four primary ikigai questions, focusing on active actions and activities that manifest in observable outcomes. For instance, activities such as painting or gardening should be prioritized over passively watching television.
- Clients may identify more than one ikigai and discover that their ikigai may change as their circumstances change. Clients should be encouraged to revisit this exercise regularly as well as every time they feel a sense of misalignment between their values and actions.



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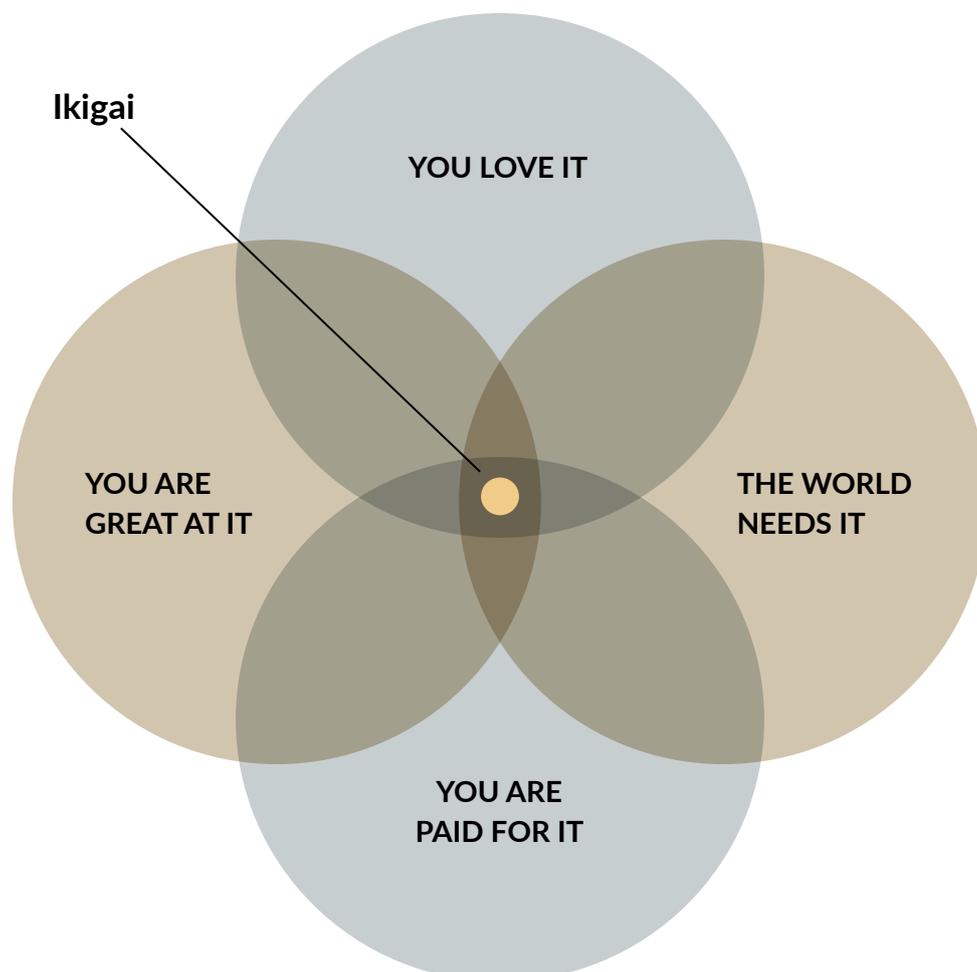
Finding Your Ikigai

Step 1: Understand what ikigai means

The secret to a long and happy life is to live with purpose every day. Living a life with meaning and value can make you happier, more content, more resilient through hard times, and more likely to influence the lives of others. People can find meaning from many different sources: relationships, work, religion, or hobbies, for example. What gives you a sense of meaning or purpose in life?

According to the Japanese culture, one way to a more meaningful and purposeful life is to discover your ikigai (ee-key-guy). Roughly translated as 'a reason for being' or 'a reason for getting up in the morning,' finding one's ikigai provides a reason for living even when faced with adversity, hardship, and suffering. To discover your ikigai, you must first identify: what you love, what the world needs, what you can be paid for, and what you are good at. Ikigai can be found at the point at which these four elements converge (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. The four ingredients of ikigai





Important note: If your responses in this exercise do not reveal an activity that you love, believe in, are good at, and can get paid for, do not be deterred. Finding your ikigai is not likely to happen on the first attempt and can take time, practice, and patience.

Step 2: Filling in your ikigai chart

Finding one's ikigai is an ongoing process of self-reflection. Your ikigai is likely to change as your circumstances change over time. Therefore, it is beneficial to practice this exercise as often as you can so that you continue to explore different possibilities as your circumstances change.

In the following exercise, you will answer four questions related to your ikigai. Take a few minutes to think about each question. Then write any words, phrases, and ideas in the relevant circle of your ikigai chart (Appendix C). Your ikigai is the point at which your answers to these four questions overlap. Please note that for each of the four questions, a list with additional self-reflective prompts is provided in Appendix A.

Circle 1. What do you love?

Passion is essential to finding your ikigai; without it, one might argue that you cannot find your reason for living. What do you genuinely feel passionate about? Take a few minutes to think of the things you love in any aspect of life: your work, your family, volunteer activities, or personal interests and hobbies, for example. Perhaps you have a passion for science, gardening, or traveling.

Write your answers in the section of your ikigai chart labeled 'What you love.'

Circle 2. What does the world need?

Humans are social animals - when we know that we are needed by others, we feel useful, valuable, and full of purpose. This question will help you discover what you can give to the world. Thinking about what the world needs globally might seem like an overwhelming task, so take a step back from the big picture and think about this question in smaller, more local terms. Think about what your friends, family, and immediate community need. These needs can include just about anything: a product, a service, or something as simple as helping one single person.

Write your answers in the section of your ikigai chart labeled 'What the world needs.'

Circle 3. What can you get paid for?

The concept of ikigai is also related to finances because when you can get paid for doing something that you love, you have the foundation for a happier, more fulfilling life. Yet, finding a job where you can apply your talents, share your passion, and get paid for is often difficult to achieve. Consider your previous employment positions: What were you good at? Did you excel at anything in particular when employed in those roles? Think about the specific skills you have that could make you money today.

Write your answers in the section of your ikigai chart labeled 'What I can be paid for.'

Circle 4. What are you good at?

Figuring out what you are good at involves a lot of self-evaluation. This question will help you think about your talents and skills. Before answering, take some time to think about your skills, your strengths, and all the things you are capable of doing well - no matter how big or small. Perhaps you have a particular skill or talent that comes naturally to you, that people find helpful, or that you have worked hard to achieve.

Write your answers in the section of your ikigai chart labeled 'What I am good at.'

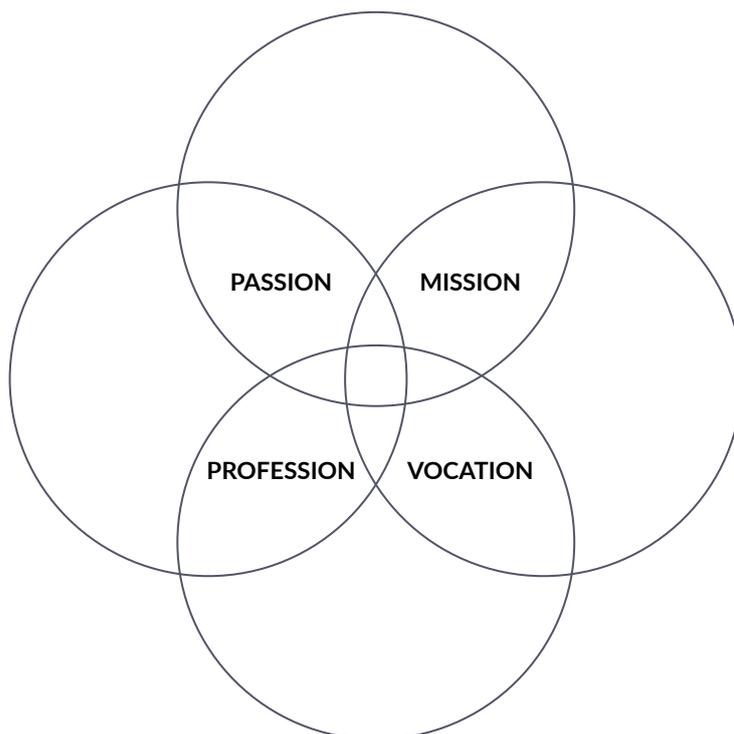
Step 3: Find overlapping responses

Now that you have spent some time thinking and writing down your responses, you might notice that some of your answers appear in multiple circles of your ikigai chart or that some answers are closely related. For instance, if you love teaching (what you love) and you believe the world would benefit from more knowledge (what the world needs), there is a clear overlap between these two. In this step, you will look for similarities between the answers in each of the four circles. These overlapping areas will help you find your ikigai.

Any responses that fit into more than one of two adjacent circles should be written in the overlapping section that lies in between these two circles (see Fig. 2). For instance, if a response appears in the circle 'what you love' and also in the circle 'what the world needs,' then **write this response in the overlapping space between the two circles labeled 'your mission.'** Fill in the remaining sections of your ikigai chart in the same way.

Write any response that fits into all four circles in the center of your ikigai chart. This response is your key to a more fulfilling and meaningful life.

Fig. 2. Mission, vocation, profession and passion in the ikigai chart





A more detailed description of each possible overlap is described below:

What you love + what you are good at = your passion

If any item listed in 'what you love' also appears in 'what you are good at,' then you have found your passion. When activities fall into these two categories, you might experience a feeling of satisfaction, but you might also feel that you are not contributing as much to the world as you could. Importantly, no matter how passionate you are about something, if you receive no financial reward for it, it is not sustainable in the long term.

What you love + what the world needs = your mission

If any item listed in 'what you love' also appears in 'what the world needs,' then you have found your mission. When activities fall into these two categories, you are likely to experience delight and fullness, but you are also likely to notice a distinct absence of income and financial stability.

What you can be paid for + what the world needs = your vocation

If any item listed in 'what you can be paid for' also appears in 'what the world needs,' then you have found your vocation. These activities can have a positive influence on the world and have the bonus of providing an income. However, not being good at your job can create anxiety, and without love for what you are doing, the experience can feel empty and unfulfilling.

What you are good at + what you can be paid for = your profession

If any item listed in 'what you are good at' also appears in 'what you can be paid for,' then you have found your profession. You might feel comfortable during these activities; however, doing something that you do not love and that the world does not need can make your work and efforts feel trivial.

All four circles = Your ikigai

Does something appear in all four circles? When any response appears in what you love, what you're good at, what you can be paid for, and what the world needs, you have found your ikigai. Discovering your ikigai means that you have found something that is meaningful, fulfilling, and sustainable.

Step 4: Find the missing circle(s) of your ikigai

To find your ikigai, you must first address the circles that are missing and therefore need attention. How can you fill in the missing piece of your ikigai puzzle? By reflecting on the actions that you can take to improve that particular circle, you will be one step closer to finding your ikigai. In this step, you will look more closely at what is missing.



Take your time and look closely at the responses listed in the previous step. Is there one activity or theme that appears in more than one circle? **Write this activity/theme down in the first column of the table below. In the second column, write which of the four circles the activity/theme appears. Finally, in the last column, list the circle(s) in which this activity/theme is not present.**

Activity/Theme	Appears in these circles	What is missing?
e.g., teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ what I love ■ what I am good at ■ what the world needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ what I can be paid for

Step 5: Address the missing circle(s)

For every activity/theme listed in the table of step 4, consider the circles that are currently missing (your responses in the last column). The questions below are designed to get you thinking about how you can develop the specific circles so that the activity/theme at hand can become your ikigai.

1. I do not love this activity/theme

Your love for an activity/theme will motivate you to keep going, especially during challenging times. When you do not feel passion for an activity, it can leave you feeling unsatisfied and unfulfilled, so it is now time to think about how you can turn this activity into something you enjoy and love to do.



What aspects of this activity do you dislike? Why?

Is there a way to make these aspects more enjoyable or less of a problem? For instance, you could work together with someone, let others take care of these aspects, or develop enough skills so that they require less effort.

List 3 positive things about this activity.

What aspects of this activity do you enjoy and feel a connection with? What steps can you take to do more of these?



What aspects of this activity are you curious about? Are there any areas you are interested in learning more about?

In what ways does this activity benefit you?

How has this activity helped you grow and develop as a person?

What skills have you developed by doing this activity?



2. I am not good at this

While it is great to be naturally talented at something, with some activities, it is necessary to commit the time and effort required to improve an existing skill or master a new one. When you become more skilled at something you love to do, you will enjoy it even more. If you are not quite as skilled at this activity as you would like to be, your ability can always improve over time. Now is the time to think about how you can enhance your skills, techniques, and knowledge necessary to carry out this particular activity.

Why do you think you are not good at this activity?

Excessively high standards can be counterproductive. Is it possible that you are more skilled than you give yourself credit for?

What skills would be most useful for this activity?



Which of these skills do you possess? What actions can you take to improve these skills further?

Which of these skills do you not possess? What actions can you take to learn these skills?

Make a list of people who excel at this activity. What skills or strengths do they possess?

Which of these skills do you possess?

Think of someone who would be a good mentor, how might they help you improve your skills?



3. I do not make any money with this activity

While the financial aspect is less important for some in terms of their ikigai, for others, it is crucial to work out how you can monetize an activity so that it provides a desirable - yet realistic - income. If financial compensation is stopping you from finding your ikigai, it is time to get creative and find new ways of gaining revenue through this activity. Imagine your chosen activity is drawing: you love to draw, are good at your craft, and people like what you do, so perhaps you could work on this missing aspect by working towards becoming an illustrator.

Is being paid for this activity important to you?

What are the main reasons you do not currently get paid for this activity?

How can you work on these barriers so that you might begin to earn an income?

Are you skilled enough at this activity? If not, how can you improve your performance to increase people's willingness to pay for your talents?



How have other people earned money from this activity or related activities?

What similar activities might provide an income?

In what ways could you earn money from this activity alongside your current job? For instance, if you love to create art, you might consider opening an online shop.

List 3 ways you could profit from your passion.



4. This is not what the world needs

Working to achieve something that contributes to society and the world at large can help create a sense of purpose larger than yourself. It is now time to think about how you can connect this activity with what the world needs and contribute to your society.

Can you think of a way in which your activity/theme could be of value to others? If so, how?

Can you think of applying your theme/activity in such a way that it could make a positive contribution to the world?

What do the people in your immediate society (e.g., your friends, family, and peers) need?

In what ways can you meet their needs using this activity?



Write down all the different ways in which you can share this activity with others. Try thinking outside the box; for example, you might choose to write a regular blog about the activity and share your passion with the world.

Is this activity something that you can teach others around you or online?

How might this activity contribute positively to those around you?



Appendix A: Prompts

Question 1: What do you love?

What do you never get bored of?

What makes you smile?

When do you feel happiest?

What 5 things do you cherish most?

What were you doing when you last lost track of time?

In the past, what has left you feeling energized?

Who are the people you love spending time with?

What did you love to do as a child?

If you were financially secure, what would you do with your time?

Is there an activity, person, or place that you never get bored of?

What activities make you lose track of time?

What aspects of your life make you feel alive and energized?

What do you feel passionate about?

What are your values, and how do you use them every day?

Where do you find beauty?

If you could be the best at one thing, what would it be?

What can you not stop talking about outside of the workplace?

What would you continue to do even if you did not get paid?

What would you choose to do with your time if you did not have to worry about making money?

How would you spend your perfect weekend?

What excites you when you do it?

What could you talk about for hours on end?

Question 2: What are you good at?

What skills do you spend time practicing?

What do people approach you for help with?

Have you ever won an award?

What skills do you list on your resume?

Is there something you would like to be good at?

To what activities have you ever devoted over 100 hours practicing or learning?



If you had to teach something, what would you teach?

What skills or talents come naturally to you?

What do you excel at even when you are not trying?

What makes you feel good about yourself?

What do other people compliment you about?

What achievements are you proud of?

Do you get excited about developing your skills in this area further?

What parts of your current job come to you easily?

In what activity do you excel in your social circle, workplace, or community?

With some more education and experience, could you be among the best at what you do?

Question 3: What can you get paid for?

What have you been paid for before?

What would you be doing if you were not in your current job?

What do people need? Do you think they would be happy to pay for it?

Can doing this give you the income you want/need right now?

Can you make a good living doing this work in the long term?

Are people willing to part with their resources to pay for what you have to offer?

What does the competition look like - can you spot a niche?

Which jobs, positions, or tasks spark your interest?

Are you already making a good living in your line of work?

Question 4: What does the world need?

What do the people in your immediate society need?

Is there something about the way the world works that you want to change?

How can you contribute positively to those around you?

Think of 3 skills you have that are in high demand.

What changes would you like to bring about in the world?

What can you do or offer that would bring meaning to others?

If you could get a message across to a large group of people, what would your message be?

How do you help others?

What can you teach others?



What kind of contribution would you love to make in life?

What problems in your society would you like to help solve?

What issues in your community or the whole world touch you emotionally?

Will your work still be relevant a decade from now?

What would you like to see people do more of or differently?

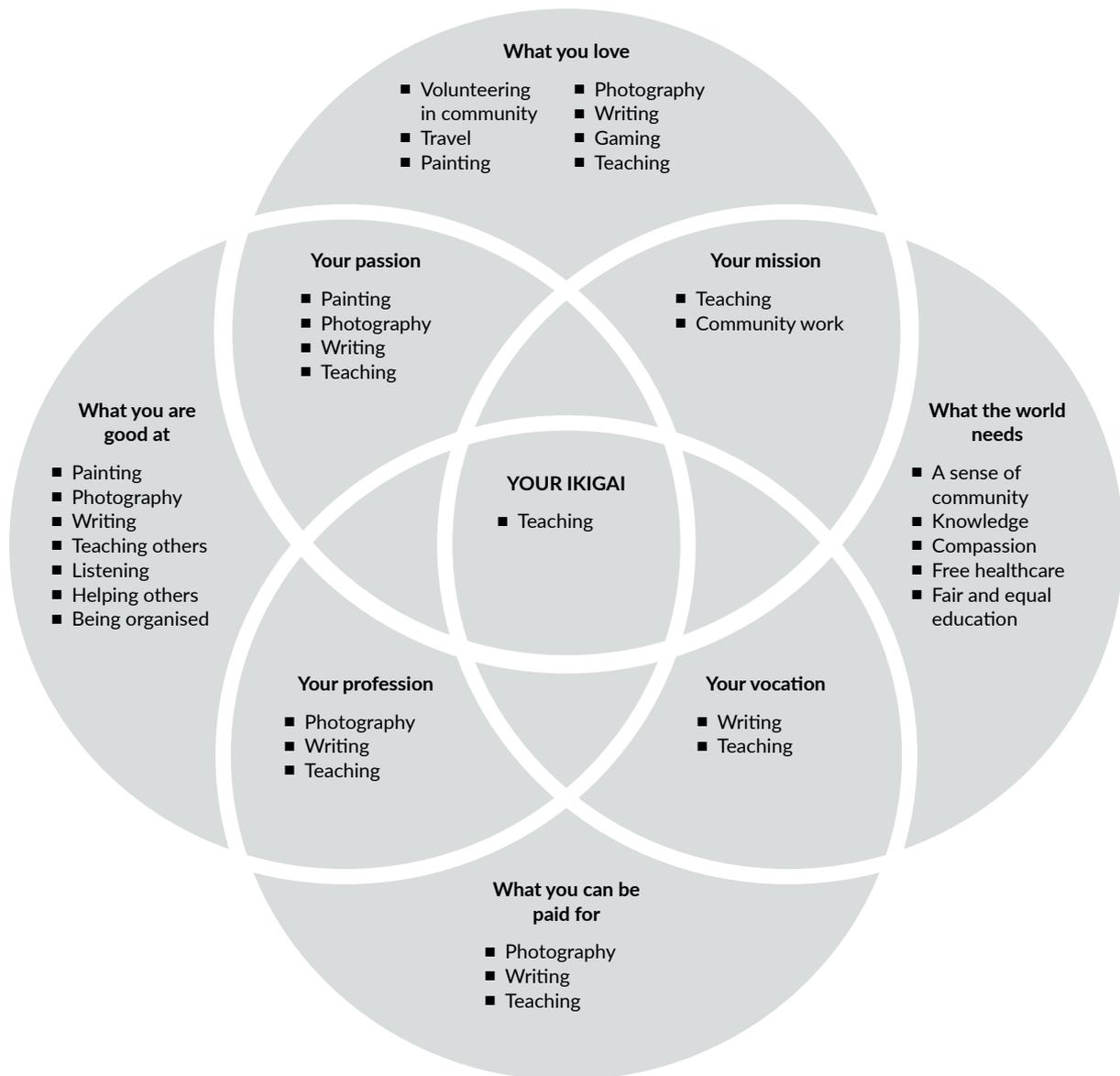
What is the world lacking?

How could you be more involved in your community?



Appendix B: Example of a completed ikigai chart

IKIGAI YOUR REASON FOR BEING





Appendix C: Blank ikigai chart

IKIGAI YOUR REASON FOR BEING

