

Finding Life's Purpose And Getting Smart About Smart Services

William Laurent · February 4, 2022 · 5 minute read



"I needed to find my ikigai," says Alex Valaitis, explaining how he had been traveling the world, which forced him to finally come to terms with finding his life's purpose. "I was living in Europe and wondering what was next in life," he confides, "What was I good at? How could I make a difference?"

Ikigai? Living in Tokyo for much of my adult life, I have heard this word used—well, frankly overused—on a regular basis. Friends, coworkers, lovers, enemies: they were always moaning and pontificating about their ikigai—which literally translated from Japanese, means "your reason for being". Over the years, I had indulged the ikigai conundrum with others (always to my annoyance) day in and day out. But I swiftly ascertained that today—in the dimly lit JW Marriott lounge in downtown Miami—this worn-out topic would reverse trajectory and trend to the extraordinary.

Alex Valaitis is the Head of Strategy and Operations for the DeSo Foundation, which puts him at the top of thought leadership in the blockchain and crypto spaces. An alum of both LinkedIn and Intuit, and the author of the best-selling book Modern College, Alex is now realizing his vision of being a leading agent of change for Web3.

For several years, Alex had hoped to better align his career with his passions. But how could he merge his expertise in social media with his fondness for all things crypto? Sometime during the height of the Covid epidemic in early 2020—when daily introspection and self-assessment became prerequisites for mental wellness—his intuition finally morphed into revelation: social media could, would, and should be run on blockchains. Armed with this conviction, Alex began to research his way forward.

A dream of a “LinkedIn meets [Coinbase](#)” application that could run on a blockchain, which was a vision as visceral as it was incomplete, had ferociously established its monopoly on his imagination for years. That changed in the Spring of 2021, when Valaitis learned of Nader Al-Naji’s successful launch of Bitclout.com on the DeSo blockchain; what was once equal-parts aspiration and apparition had suddenly become empirical. Alex soon realized that he shared a mutual friend with Al-Naji, asked that friend to help connect the two of them, and then karma took care of the rest: they talked; Alex was hired, and the DeSo Foundation received an added spark to help set the Web3 world ablaze.

“What was I good at? How could I make a difference?”

Alex wastes no time jumping deep into the technical aspects of DeSo, so deep that I have to ask him to back up several times and explain several concepts to me again. Our discussion inevitably turns to the subject of smart services vs. smart contracts, and we spend a good deal of our time drilling into the advantages of the former.

“With smart services, the barrier to entry for developers is much lower. This is an API-based approach. It’s easier, more accessible,” Alex asserts. “Smart contracts are not as efficient as they distribute computational power among participants.”

Eventually, his evangelism reaches a crescendo, “Look at Ethereum, do you not see how much it is handicapped when it comes to transactions per second and storage? Sure, Ethereum introduced landmark primitives (ICOs, NFTs) which changed the world, but at this point in time, less than 0.5% of the developers on Stack Overflow are ‘gas constrained’ Solidity developers.”

Although I am receiving a much-appreciated crash course on blockchain fundamentals, I am somewhat relieved when our conversation shifts to social media-oriented topics, where my lack of technical acumen is not glaringly exposed. (Note: The DeSo [white paper](#) lays out the basics of its APIs and smart services quite eloquently. Give it a read!)

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Alex’s boss, Nader, although now fully doxed and regularly making public appearances, still retains his Wizard of Oz stature for many in the DeSo community. Alex ironically acknowledges the sometimes cult-like veneration of Nader, before he offers some counterpoint, “He is, in fact, the most down-to-earth person I know. He is just a super chill guy.” He adds, “his emotional intelligence is remarkable. Think about the work he has taken on—dealing directly with all the operating pieces of DeSo, while doing his best to make both investors and the community happy.” Alex continues, “And he works harder than anybody, and that is saying a lot because I often get pegged as being a workaholic.”

Although the price of \$DESO has recently suffered a steep decline—as have most coins in the crypto bear market of early 2022—Alex and I find common ground in our belief that DeSo users should concern themselves less with token price (as well as the price of their own on-platform social tokens) and focus more on building the tools, and the community, that will propel \$DESO to new heights. “The \$DESO price should accelerate as the DeSo ecosystem grows,” Valaitis states. He judiciously adds: “When we stop worrying about the market price of \$DESO, when it becomes more important to acquire \$DESO so that one can transact business [i.e. invest in creators, buy and sell NFTs, leave tips for compelling content] in the DeSo ecosystem, that is the time when \$DESO’s true value will shine.”

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When asked about legacy—how he wants the DeSo platform and its core team to be remembered—his tone of voice shifts—as serious as cancer and as sincere as a cardigan pullover on this chilly Miami night, “We succeed if the core team fades into the background, when the users of DeSo stop talking about us.” He continues, “We will succeed when people are talking about the applications on the DeSo blockchain, not discussing any one person. If it’s Dorsey vs. Nader, we have lost. That’s not Web3. Web3 is about the community.”

Valaitis wants everyone to understand that the job of the DeSo core team is, first and foremost, to provide the platform and tools that pave the way for the killer on-chain applications: “The killer apps will come. Our job is to provide the best chance for as many as possible to survive and eventually thrive.”

Our hour-long talk had left me slightly smarter about smart services, and more certain that I needed to gain a much deeper understanding of Blockchain fundamentals. However, when it came to Alex Valaitis himself, one important matter had been cleared up: this was a guy that had at last found his ikigai.



William Laurent is Blockster’s Editor in Chief. Widely published throughout his career, Will is regularly featured in American Banker, Foundry, and Tech for Good to name a few. He’s advised over 30 Fortune 500 companies across North America and Asia on content strategy, data visualization, and digital/cultural transformation. He is an influential educator, writer, artist, crypto dad, and husband. His artwork and NFTs are sought-after collectibles. Connect with William on [DeSo](#) and [LinkedIn](#).