

Navigating the Undercurrents of Radical Change

Insights from Jonathan Brill's *Rogue Waves*, Chapter Two: "Ten Undercurrents Will Cause the Next Rogue Wave"

In his book *Rogue Waves: Future-Proof Your Business to Survive and Profit from Radical Change*, futurist Jonathan Brill, the 2025 Envision Greater Green Bay's World Futures Day keynote speaker, warns that the world's greatest disruptions rarely come from nowhere. Instead, they rise from deep "undercurrents"—powerful, unseen forces in the social, economic, and technological seas that shape everything above them. Just as ocean undercurrents dictate the motion of surface waves, these human and technological forces steer the tides of civilization.

Brill reminds us that *no matter how fast you think the future is moving, it's moving faster*. To stay ahead, leaders must recognize that every macrotrend—the sweeping changes we see in markets or culture—is the sum of thousands of smaller, individual events. Within those events lie both risk and remarkable opportunity. The key is learning to recognize the patterns before they crest into full-blown waves.

The Ten Undercurrents of Change

Brill identifies **ten major undercurrents** shaping our future. Understanding where they intersect is the first step toward building resilient strategy:

1. **Changing Demographics:** The balance between *labor and consumption* will determine workforce strength and market demand.
2. **The Data Economy:** The tension between *value creation and value extraction* defines how data becomes the new currency.
Automation: The struggle between *labor availability and labor cost* reshapes industries and employment itself.
3. **The Rise of Asia:** *Market access vs. resource availability* will drive geopolitical and economic shifts.
4. **Cheap Money:** The tension between *growth and profitability* alters how companies finance their futures.
5. **Emerging Technologies:** The balance between *efficiency and social impact* will test both ethics and innovation.
6. **The Closing Innovation Window:** As R&D accelerates, *faster development vs. shorter product cycles* demands rapid adaptability.
7. **Remixing and Convergence:** *Disruptive innovation vs. disruptive integration* defines the new frontier of collaboration.
8. **Digital Trust:** *Public goods vs. private goods* frame the moral and regulatory battles around technology and privacy.
9. **New Social Contracts:** The tension between *rights and regulation* will redefine the relationship between citizens, corporations, and governments.

Each undercurrent carries its own risks and rewards—but when two or more interact, that's when the next "rogue wave" begins to build.

Spotting the Next Rogue Wave

Brill offers a practical framework for identifying—and surviving—the next big disruption:

- **Stay informed:** Ensure your organization has at least a passing familiarity with today's major undercurrents.
- **Watch for intersections:** Pay special attention to events that cause two or more undercurrents to interact—these collisions often generate the biggest waves.
- **Build shared awareness:** Equip your entire team to scan the horizon. A culture attuned to signals of change can spot early indicators faster than any single leader can.

Preparing for What's Next

To future-proof your organization, Brill outlines **four key steps** for assessing threats and opportunities:

1. **Scan your horizon:** Identify the signals of radical change in your industry.
2. **List implications for your FOES:** Consider how shifts affect your **Finance, Operations, Environment, and Strategy**.
3. **Identify your response window:** Know how much time you have before a threat—or opportunity—becomes critical.
4. **Build a dashboard:** Track indicators that help you detect when an undercurrent begins to turn into a rogue wave.

What You Can Do Today

Start small, but start now. Brill suggests seven immediate actions to make your organization more resilient:

- **Complete a threat and opportunity assessment**
- **Evaluate your strategic team**
- **Understand what you're measuring**
- **Find the low-hanging fruit for improvement**
- **Designate a sponsor for resilience initiatives**
- **Establish a reporting cadence**
- **Teach your team to think like futurists**

The future, Brill reminds us, doesn't just happen—it's built by those who can read the waves before they crash.

Check out the entire book: *Rogue Waves: Future-Proof Your Business to Survive and Profit from Radical Change* by Jonathan Brill, Copyright 2021 and published by McGraw Hill.