RIDING THE WAVES OF THE NEVER NORMAL

the UNCERTAINTY principle

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my four grandparents—the people who shaped me into who I am today. I am the combination of all four, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

To Rene Vermandel, who left this world far too soon. Though I never had the chance to know you, the stories about your kindness, your loving nature, your warmth, and your endless curiosity have always stayed with me. Your spirit lives on in the values I cherish most.

To Margriet Labat, who raised me as a young boy. My early childhood is filled with memories of your care, and that warmth still lingers with me today. Thank you for giving me such a strong foundation of love and security.

To Betty Backers, whose infectious joy for life has always been an inspiration. Your ability to embrace life with such positivity and energy continues to remind me of what truly matters.

To Theo Hinssen, who had a profound influence on my life. Your dedication, passion, and unwavering work ethic were a powerful example for me. I had the privilege of truly connecting with you as I was starting my journey, and those conversations meant the world to me. How you delighted in my passion for technology and entrepreneurship is something I'll never forget. I can only hope to pass on your mindset and values to the next generation.

This book stands as a tribute to their influence, their love, and their lasting legacy.

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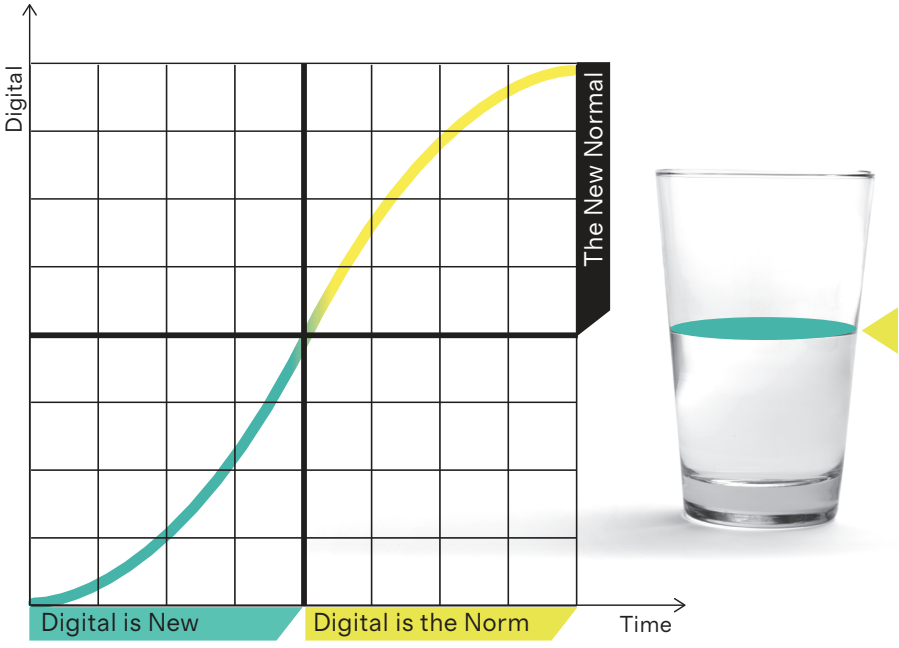
The Never Normal

If you're always trying to be normal, you will never know how truly amazing you can be. —MAYA ANGELOU

I have a deeply complex relationship with the word 'normal'.

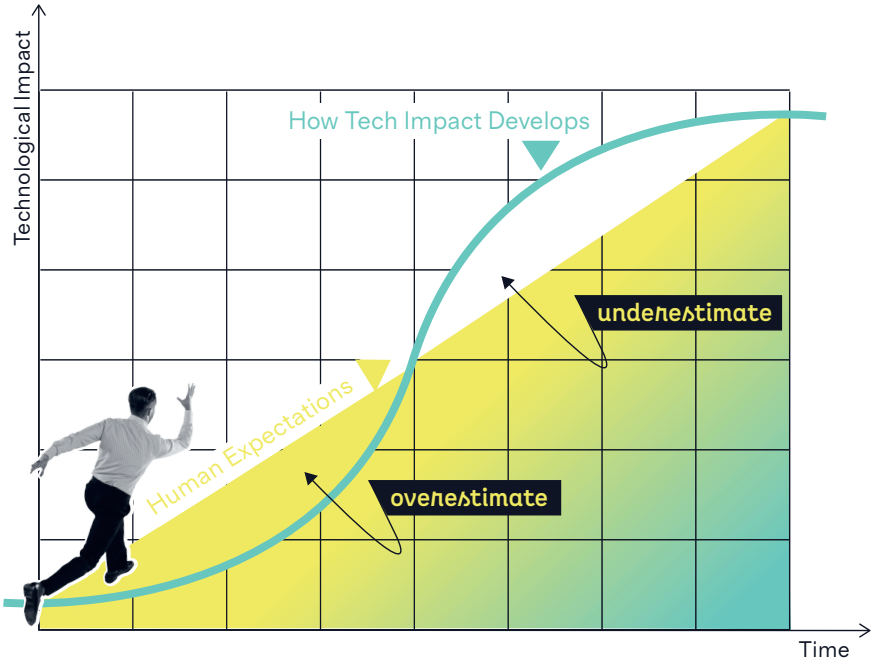
Back in 2010, when I published my first mainstream business book, *The New Normal*, I was quite pleased with myself for coining the concept; not least because of that neat little alliteration that rolled so smoothly off the tongue. At the time, I was obsessed with the idea that digital—still seen as a kind of 'magic'—would one day become the norm. So I wrote an entire book to persuade the world of this inevitable transformation.

Years of experience as a tech entrepreneur had taught me that this is simply how technological innovation works. It follows an S-curve: it starts as something 'special', then, as adoption accelerates, it flips into the second phase where it becomes 'ordinary'. And, looking back, that's exactly what happened with digital. No one even uses that word anymore. That's how run-of-the-mill it has become.



Over the years, I also came to recognize a fascinating disconnect between the technological S-curve and our expectation-curve. They rarely align. Roy Amara captured this dynamic best in his eponymous law: 'We tend to overestimate the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run.'

The contrast between the two plays out something like this:



After that, I became truly passionate about finding the Next Normal: identifying the next big thing still simmering beneath the surface, ready to reshape our lives before inevitably evolving into just another commodity. But as I dug deeper, I realized something had changed. There wasn't just one singular next big thing, there were many.

So I introduced a new term: New Normals, plural.

Belgian designer and researcher Thomas Lommée perfectly captured that idea when he wrote 'The next big thing will be a lot of small things' on the facade of one of the Ghent University buildings in 2015. I came to understand that rather than one 'Big' New Normal, we were dealing with several 'Little' New Normals—like Big Data, AI, quantum computing, the metaverse and many more. In some ways, it was as if we were observing a quantum state that had yet to collapse, existing in multiple possibilities and scenarios at once.

After the pandemic, however, I grew to loathe the term New Normal. It had become inextricably linked to the impact of COVID—synonymous with lockdowns, restrictions, and all the challenges that came with them. What was once a term of progress and transformation had taken on a

darker, more limiting connotation. As I said, my relationship with 'normal' has always been complicated.

Then came another curveball (see what I did there?).

The pattern of consecutive S-curves replacing one another still held true, just as the brilliant Carlota Perez—one of my personal heroes—once described: 'The Industrial Revolution gave way to the Age of Steam, which was followed by the Age of Steel, Electricity, and Engineering, then the Age of Oil, Automobiles, and Mass Production, eventually leading to our current Age of Information'. But the real shift wasn't in *what* was happening, it was in how fast. What once took 20 to 30 years to fully play out was now accelerating, with cycles compressing into just a decade. The pace of transformation had shifted into overdrive.

While our grandparents and parents largely experienced *one* major wave of innovation in their lifetimes, we are now witnessing three or four. Our children may see five, six, or even seven. The forces of creative destruction and disruption still follow the same patterns. But now, they're accelerating faster than ever before. And I'm not sure they are 'little' changes any longer…

One of the most profound consequences of this acceleration is how we *perceive* the forces of change. Think of a tree. To most of us, trees appear steadfast and unchanging. But if you were to speed up their growth—from seed to sapling to towering oak—and then watch their seasonal transformations over years, the sheer scale of change would be staggering. In the same way, technological S-curves are no longer distant, abstract phenomena. For the first time, we can actually *see* several of them unfold within our own lifetimes. That acceleration, that dynamic of continuous change is what I have come to call the Never Normal.

The Never Normal makes many of us extremely uncomfortable. It also fuels the belief that we are experiencing the most volatile and uncertain period in human history. I'm pretty sure that someone living through the fall of Roman Empire, the Great Depression or the Chinese Cultural Revolution might disagree. A big reason for this perception is chronocentrism: our innate tendency to see our own era as uniquely significant and to assume that the events shaping our world are more valuable than those of the past. Every generation believes they are witnessing unprecedented times and that history is shifting in ways never seen before. And, of course, we are no different.

But the only truly unprecedented thing right now is the speed. Not the uncertainty. In many ways, things have always been volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (good old VUCA) or brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible (BANI). Unexpected things have always happened. 'It [was always] difficult to make predictions, especially about the future,' to use Nobel prize-winning quantum physicist Niels Bohr's quip. Just ask Xerox, Blackberry, Blockbuster or even Louis XVI.

But I have come to believe that this Never Normal 'Uncertainty' is not necessarily a bad thing.

In the 1949 classic *The Third Man*, a character called Harry Lime (played by Orson Welles) tells the protagonist Holly Martins a story about a cuckoo clock he purchased in Switzerland. He says: 'In Italy, for 30 years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. But in Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had 500 years of democracy and peace—and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.'

As cynical as it may sound, limitations often force the imagination to work harder than in 'easy' conditions. That is why hard times often breed more radical, long-lasting innovations. Look at what the Cold War forced DARPA to come up with, as I'll explain later. Just like that, the current seismic shocks—be they technological, geopolitical, biological, social or economic—force us to look for solutions that are exceptionally useful. Which is why I, as a pathological optimist, believe that the Never Normal is an opportunity more than a challenge. It is ripe with untapped raw potential.

We just need a little imagination to be able to thrive.

Werner Karl Heisenberg was a German theoretical physicist, one of the main pioneers of the theory of quantum mechanics and, of course, the originator of 'The Uncertainty Principle', also the title of this book. Heisenberg taught us that 'Not only is the Universe stranger than we think, it is stranger than we *can* think.' You could say the same about the future in uncertain times: it is often stranger than we *can* think. It is filled with 'unknown unknowns' as Donald Rumsfeld loved to say.

These unknowns are why prediction is such a powerful tool, but also one with clear limitations. We can never control the future by forecasting it, but we *can* control how we respond to it—and how fast. The key is not to be paralyzed by fear when faced with the Never Normal. American

futurist Alvin Toffler captured this phenomenon perfectly with the term 'future shock'—the 'physical and psychological distress suffered by those unable to cope with the rapid pace of social and technological change'. That's probably why we've been experiencing some kind of weird dichotomy these past few years: between those of us—like me—who are really excited about the potential of the Never Normal and then the others who are uncomfortable, anxious and would love to return to the slower pace of the Old Normal.

But I could not have formulated it any better than that other famous Heisenberg, the alias of *Breaking Bad*'s anti-hero Walter White: 'What I came to realize is that fear, that's the worst of it, that's the real enemy. So, get up, get out in the real world and you kick that bastard as hard as you can, right in the teeth.' Okay, I would have perhaps put it a little less aggressively, but you get the point, I'm sure.

At the beginning of 2025, DeepSeek sent a shock wave through the Western world. It was completely overhyped (I'm almost wondering who will remember it when this book comes out), but it's also the perfect example of how China fearlessly kicked its limitations 'right in the teeth'. This was probably not what Biden had in mind when he made the protectionist move to restrict the export of advanced chips to China. Many believed with him that the chip limitations would set back the Chinese AI industry for many years. But if there is one thing the Chinese love, it's a good challenge. Out of that emerged an obscure (well, out here in the West anyhow) company that was able to turn these constraints around and transform them into an advantage: it trained a model that was pretty much on par with those of OpenAI or Google but—and this is the impressive part—which took just two months to train, at minimal cost, using Nvidia's less-advanced H800 chips (at least that's what it claimed). And, in a power move, it even made the model Open Source. It was glorious and terrifying, depending on who you were talking to. Marc Andreessen called this the Sputnik moment of AI.

That right there. That's exactly how the Never Normal works: if you accept its pressure and use it right, you'll make diamonds out of coal.

In fact, when faced with the disruption of the Never Normal, companies have two fundamental choices: Robustness or Resilience. Robustness is about strength and resistance: the ability to withstand disruptions without being significantly affected. It's a defensive strategy, built on stability and durability. The application for organizations is typically all about 'hedging': the use of deflective mechanisms to mitigate risks.

Resilience, on the other hand, is about agility and adaptation: the capacity to recover, evolve, and even flourish in the face of change. Robustness is about survival; resilience is about thriving. It means that companies can apply a 'leverage mechanism' to not just face the Never Normal, but to use its power to unlock potential.

DeepSeek clearly chose resilience. It did not just bounce 'back'. It absorbed the disruptive energy, and used it to bounce 'forward', Aikido-style.[1] And I believe that you can too, which is why I wrote this book.

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That's where The Uncertainty Principle comes in.

As mentioned earlier, The Uncertainty Principle was introduced by physicist Werner Heisenberg in 1927 as a fundamental concept in quantum mechanics. It states that it is impossible to simultaneously know both the exact position and exact momentum of a particle with perfect precision. The more accurately one of these properties is measured, the less accurately the other can be known. This principle is not due to flaws in measurement instruments. It is a fundamental property of nature.

And of business.

Just as quantum particles are governed by inherent uncertainties, business decisions are filled with unpredictable risks. When a company embarks on a new venture or innovation, it must always embrace a certain level of uncertainty about the outcome. Paradoxically, the more a company tries to control and mitigate every aspect of a new project—much like attempting to measure both position and momentum with absolute precision—the more rigid and less adaptable it becomes. And this overemphasis on control can stifle innovation, slow decision making, and lead to missed opportunities.

The key to navigating uncertainty is actually quite simple. It lies not in control but in acceptance. We must teach our brains that uncertainty isn't something to fear. It simply means that countless possibilities lie ahead—in a quantum state, if you will—waiting to take shape until the moment you decide to act. And for those with an entrepreneurial mindset, that isn't daunting. It's absolutely thrilling.

I vigorously hope that you, dear reader, will come to share my enthusiasm about the Never Normal in the coming pages. Enjoy!

It has been my philosophy of life that

difficulties vanish when faced boldly. —ISAAC ASIMOV