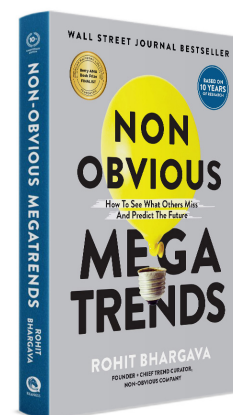


Non-Obvious Megatrends

How to See What Others Miss and Predict the Future

by **Rohit Bhargava**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

What if you could predict the trends that will change your business? For the past 10 years, Rohit Bhargava's signature annual Non-Obvious Trend Report has helped over a million readers discover more than 100 trends changing our culture. Now, in *Non-Obvious Megatrends*, Rohit and his team reveal 10 revolutionary new megatrends that are transforming how we work, play, and live.

How might the evolution of gender-fluid toys change our culture? What can the popularity of printed books teach us about the future of business? Why do machines that diagnose human ailments actually demonstrate the importance of humanity?

The answers to these questions may not be all that obvious, and that's exactly the point. But you don't need to be a futurist or innovator to learn to think like one. The key to growing your business or propelling your career into the next decade lies in better understanding the present. The future belongs to non-obvious thinkers, and *Non-Obvious Megatrends* is your guide to becoming one.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The five key mindsets of non-obvious thinking.
- To use the Haystack Method to curate non-obvious ideas.
- Why digital technologies are spurring demand for tangible products.
- How Flux Commerce is changing the way products are bought and sold.

PART I: THE ART OF NON-OBVIOUS THINKING

Introduction

Seeing what no one else sees is often described as creativity, and we live in a world that celebrates it. But finding the solution to a particularly tricky problem or discovering a world-changing idea takes more than creativity.

Isaac Asimov earned the reputation of “the man who knows everything” by writing nearly 500 books in his prolific lifetime. He is most widely known for his ground-breaking work in science fiction, but he also wrote everything from an illustrated children’s guide to dinosaurs to a comprehensive two-volume guide to The Bible.

Asimov credited his creative thinking to his legendary appetite for reading and learning about everything he could from a young age. “I am not a speed reader,” he once said. “I am a speed understander.”

It’s hard to imagine following Asimov’s recipe for understanding in today’s world. We are inundated by content, and most of it is not good. Digital tools have made it easy for everyone to share ideas, even if they are one-dimensional or idiotic.

To face this landslide of bad content, we are increasingly relying on a combination of algorithms and one-dimensional opinions shared on social media to help us filter the noise. And we’ve pioneered new methods of skimming out of sheer desperation. We watch television at accelerated speed, use speed-reading apps that flash a single word at a time, and turn to productivity gurus specializing in “time hacking.”

Be Intentional

None of these solutions work for long. The problem is that expecting to get smarter from processing content faster is a bit like entering a speed-eating contest to enjoy a good meal. Eating 26 hot dogs in 60 seconds might satisfy your hunger, but you’re likely to feel sick afterwards.

You can’t understand the world better simply by reading about it as much as possible. You do so by being intentional about what you pay attention to in the first place. What if you could become a life-long learner, curious about the world and able to see, understand, and expect things others miss? What if you could use that skill to understand patterns, spot intersections, and see around the corner to develop an observation of what the future might hold? And what if, once you put all the pieces together, you could actually learn to predict the future?

You can, through non-obvious thinking, and it can change your life.

The 5 Mindsets of Non-Obvious Thinkers

According to renowned Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck, most people have either a growth mindset or a fixed mindset. People with fixed mindsets believe that their skills and abilities are set. They see themselves as being either good or bad at something and tend to focus their efforts on tasks and careers where they feel they have a natural ability.

People with growth mindsets believe that success is the result of learning, hard work, and determination. They think that they can achieve their true potential through effort. As a result, they thrive on challenges and often have a passion for learning. They are also more likely to treat failure as “a parking ticket, not a car wreck.” They’re more resilient, have more self-confidence, and tend to be happier.

Beyond having a growth mindset, there are five additional mindsets that non-obvious thinkers have adopted to propel themselves and their organizations toward the future faster than others.

Non-obvious mindset #1: Be observant. Pay attention to the world, and train yourself to notice the details that others miss. Being observant isn’t simply about seeing the big things. It’s also about training yourself to pay attention to the little things. What do you see about a situation that other people are missing? What do the details you notice teach you about people, processes, and companies that you didn’t know before? And how can you use that knowledge to win—even if that victory is something as small as getting your luggage a little bit faster than everyone else?

Our devices excel at keeping us from seeing the world around us. Instead of navigating daily tasks such as walking down the street or taking the subway with your eyes fixed on your phone, try putting it away and looking around. Look for interesting things, observe people’s body language, or start a conversation with a stranger.

Non-obvious mindset #2: Be curious. Ask questions, invest in learning, and approach unfamiliar situations with a sense of wonder. We humans are naturally curious but often bury our curiosity because it can seem like a distraction. It is easier to move on than to stop and explore something more deeply.

Good trends always focus on the shift in an underlying human behavior or belief.

Consume “brainful media,” content and experiences that fuel your curiosity and make you think. Watch an engaging TED Talk, read a book on a topic you know little about, or attend a lecture on an unusual topic. Read unfamiliar magazines, and ask questions constantly.

Non-obvious mindset #3: Be fickle. Save interesting ideas for later consumption without over-analyzing them in the moment. Often the meaning of ideas and the connections among them surface only after setting the ideas aside. Analyzing them later can give you more ideas and perspectives that enable you to see the connections more deeply.

Save ideas offline. Tear stories out of magazines and put them all in an ideas folder. To avoid the temptation to over-analyze an idea, try using a timer to limit how much time you spend on it. Take shorter notes. Jot down a few words to remind yourself why you found something interesting.

Non-obvious mindset #4: Be thoughtful. Take time to develop a meaningful point of view, and consider alternative viewpoints. The internet is sadly filled with useless, biased, half-thought-out comments and uninformed opinions. Being thoughtful is harder to do when the priority seems to be responding quickly, regardless of what you have to say.

To be more thoughtful, we need to remind ourselves to take a moment and consider the divergent thoughts of those around us, particularly those who may not think the same way we do. Whether you are interacting online or in person, taking the time to think about what you want to say always pays off. Not only will you say what you really mean, but you’ll avoid making a gaffe because you haven’t considered how others might misinterpret your thoughts.

Non-obvious mindset #5: Be elegant. Describe ideas or insights in more beautiful, deliberate, simple, and understandable ways. Simplicity is fundamental to being elegant in how we express ourselves. When you eliminate unnecessary words, you can distill your ideas and make them easier to understand.

Poets use metaphors, imagery, alliteration, and other tools to express emotion and meaning in their writing. What can you do to use more provocative language and avoid

clichés? Everything doesn’t need to be “great” or “awesome.” Why not describe it as breathtaking or miraculous, or badass, or formidable?

These five key mindsets can help you think differently and escape lazy thinking that leads to obvious ideas. Once you get in the habit of using the five mindsets, you’ll be ready to take your non-obvious thinking to the next level: identifying interesting ideas and patterns and curating them into insights that can help you win the future.

The Haystack Method for Curating Non-Obvious Ideas

When thinking about the future, many people encounter the pitfall of describing something that is ultimately transient and meaningless. The problem is, most people don’t know what a trend is or isn’t. Let’s start with a definition: A trend is a curated observation of the accelerating present.

Good trends always focus on the shift in an underlying human behavior or belief. Trend spotting isn’t the same as identifying actual trends. When you focus on spotting stories that stand out, you gravitate toward collecting interesting ideas without understanding the broader context of what they mean.

The trend-spotter myth drives many people to equate the process of identifying trends with finding a needle in a haystack. The needle-in-a-haystack cliché is so pervasive that it inspired the name for this process of curating trends: The Haystack Method.

The Haystack Method starts with gathering stories and ideas and sorting them into groups that make sense (the hay), then analyzing each of the groups to see whether they reveal an underlying trend (the needle). There are five steps.

Step 1: Gathering is the disciplined act of collecting stories and ideas while taking notes of why they are interesting. The best way to get value from the daily deluge of media is to form a habit of saving the most interesting stories to examine later. The key is to give yourself a reminder of what you

found interesting about the story when you saved it. This will make your notes more useful when you return to them later. Start a folder, set a timeline, and seek concepts, not conclusions. Perspective often comes from the passage of time and the patience to allow patterns to emerge on their own.

Step 2: Aggregating is the process of grouping ideas together to uncover bigger themes. Once you've gathered ideas, you'll need to identify how they connect to one another. What broad group or demographic do these stories describe? What is the underlying human need or behavior revealed in these stories? What are they an example of? How is the phenomenon the stories describe affecting multiple industries? What qualities or elements make these stories interesting?

Sometimes focusing on the underlying human emotion in a story or idea can help you see why it matters and how it connects with others.

Step 3: Elevating involves identifying the underlying themes that align a group of ideas to describe a single, bigger concept. Consider these questions: What interests you most about this group of ideas? What implications of the stories might you have missed earlier? What is the broader theme that these stories have in common? How can you link stories from multiple industries into a single idea?

As you review your groups of ideas and stories, look for key words that can reveal the common themes among them. When you recognize idea clusters, look for industry-specific clusters to combine with it.

Step 4: Naming is the art of describing a collection of ideas in an accessible and memorable way. A great name should convey the trend's meaning with simplicity and be memorable. How well you name your trend will make it either stick in people's minds and stand out—or be quickly forgotten.

Consider these questions: Is the name already in use or well understood? Is it relatively simple to say out loud in conversation? Does it make sense without too much explanation? Could you imagine it as the title of a book? Are the words in the name unique, not clichéd or generic? Does it describe a topic in an unexpected way?

Step 5: Proving entails seeking out data, stories, and conversations to validate whether a collection of ideas can justifiably be described as a trend. You can evaluate trends using a framework of three key elements: the core idea of the trend, its impact, and its acceleration. For ideas, ask, is

the idea unique enough to stand out? Has anyone published research related to this trend idea?

For impact, ask, are the media starting to uncover examples of this trend, suggesting that people and businesses are changing their behavior? Are smart early-moving companies adopting the trend in some way?

For acceleration, ask, are there enough examples of the trend across multiple industries? Is the trend likely to continue for the foreseeable future?

Use authoritative sources. Proving will yield better results if you have sought out authoritative sources to support your trend ideas. In practice, this means gathering stories from reputable media sources, organizations, or academic institutions.

How to Apply Non-Obvious Thinking for Fun and Profit

Trends might offer a signal that you should consider abandoning an existing product line or staying the course in a direction that hasn't paid off yet. Or they could suggest that you should pivot the focus of your career to learn new skills.

What gives you the power to receive these signals and reach these conclusions is intersection thinking, a method for connecting disparate concepts and beliefs from unrelated industries to generate new ideas or products. There are four ways to engage in intersection thinking effectively:

- Focus on similarities.
- Embrace serendipitous ideas.
- Wander into the unfamiliar.
- Be persuadable.

Let's now explore how to put trends to work. Here are five tips for using trends.

Tip #1: Engage your customers. Understanding and leveraging trends to improve how you engage customers starts with building a better picture of how your customers behave. One useful tool is the customer journey map—a diagram that illustrates the phases that typical customers go through when they interact with your product or service. Mapping this customer journey can help you understand where and when in the journey to engage in a trend to improve customers' experience and win their loyalty.

Tip #2: Share your story. A powerful story can inspire support. Unfortunately, the internet is filled with boring “about us” pages instead. These are not the same as a story. A brand story is emotional and human. It inspires people to believe in a product, brand, or message.

Trends can influence how you tell your story. What is the larger purpose behind why your brand exists? What shifts in consumer beliefs or your industry have made your existence more relevant today? These are the sorts of questions that a well-told story can help to answer.

There is a growing understanding that a person's gender can differ from that person's sex.

Tip #3: Evolve your story. Tapping into trends can help you make changes to your company's strategy, whether it's evolving your business model or considering new partners to help you connect with unexpected audiences. Focus on five key areas:

- **Mission:** Why you do what you do and what you believe in.
- **Positioning:** What makes your brand unique compared with that of your competitors.
- **Business model:** How you charge customers and make money.
- **Products and services:** What you sell to your customers.
- **Innovation:** What new products or services you may offer.

Tip #4: Strengthen your company's culture. Contrary to what you might have read, you don't have to provide free food, massages, or ping-pong tables to inspire a great company culture. Workplace surveys after surveys show that what people desire most is making an authentic human connection with their co-workers feel-

ing that their work matters, and having some autonomy over their own time. Tapping into trends can help you strengthen your company's culture in all these areas.

Tip #5: Develop your career. Trends can help you anticipate the growth of an industry or offer insights into what customers are looking for, enabling you to make timely new product or service recommendations at work. They also can help you forecast what new skills you might need in the near future so you can invest time to learn them now.

Let's now look at four of the 10 non-obvious megatrends and learn how to use them.

PART II: THE NON-OBVIOUS MEGATRENDS

Ungendering

Traditional gender divisions and labels are getting replaced with a more fluid understanding of gender identity, forcing a reevaluation of how we see employees, customers, brands, and one another.

We are living in the time of Ungendering. As the stereotypes of feminine and masculine ideals are supplanted, the traditional labels and roles once prescribed to our identities based on gender are no longer as meaningful. This is leading to an evolved view of what role gender should play in the products we buy, the experiences we enjoy, and even the way we define ourselves.

For a growing number of organizations, this is forcing a fundamental reimagining of basic assumptions and messaging in marketing, merchandising (men's and women's sizes), and how they deliver services or even categorize their products themselves.

Gender X

Though the concept of a nonbinary gender identity still might seem like a fringe idea, there are signs that this often-misunderstood label is gaining mainstream acceptance across the world. There is a growing understanding that a person's gender can differ from that person's sex.

A newborn's sex is assigned at birth based on the baby's genitalia. Gender, however, is to many a question of identity; it's how you carry yourself and interact socially with the world. For a growing number of people, gender is never described in singular terms but rather along a spectrum depending on how they present themselves to the world.

Jonathan Van Ness, one of the stars of the Netflix show *Queer Eye*, perhaps summed up this perspective on gender best in an interview for *Out* magazine: “I’m gender nonconforming. Like, some days I feel like a man, but then other days I feel like a woman.”

At the time of this writing, more than 10 U.S. states have passed legislation allowing individuals to select a gender-neutral choice of X (this is the letter used instead of M or F) on their driver’s license and ID cards. Over the past decade, about a dozen countries, including Australia, Germany, Canada, and India, also have allowed for a third gender option on passports.

As nations around the world become more accepting of non-binary gender status, companies and brands are responding by reshaping the products and experiences they sell to fit into this new world of Ungendering.

How to Use Ungendering

Remove unnecessary gendering. Look closely at your current products and services, especially how they are packaged and marketed, and consider how you can remove unnecessary gendering and make them more inclusive and expansive.

Encourage nontoxic masculinity. When men or boys express a passion or curiosity for exploring traditionally feminine things, avoid making quick judgments, and instead, encourage them. To reinforce these experiences, consider using nonconforming images and messaging when portraying men and their relationships to women, to encourage nontoxic views of masculinity and ensure the men, and particularly boys, feel it is acceptable to love what they love, share their emotions more openly, and treat all people with respect regardless of gender identity.

Have more gender empathy. Shifting one’s thinking to consider gender as being on a spectrum rather than binary is not easy. Yet leaders, teachers, and politicians who do will become far more effective because they will earn the respect and loyalty of those who previously were considered outcasts and finally feel understood.

Revivalism

Long-running magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Teen Vogue* have announced they are shifting to digital-only publications. According to PwC’s Global Entertainment & Media Outlook 2018–2022, “sales of physical video games, re-

corded music, and home video are expected to decline each year, in some instances by double-digit percentages.” Yet one form of media has proven remarkably resistant to this shift: printed books.

The same PwC report also notes that sales of physical books are expected to grow modestly during the next several years.

We increasingly value things that we can hold in our hands and experience in a tactile way. These items feel more significant precisely because we spend so much of our lives in the digital realm. The photos we print and display, for example, hold an added significance apart from the thousands we take and then archive in our phones or on the cloud, never to be seen again.

Today we see a broader shift happening. As we become overwhelmed by a general sense that life has become too complex, we are finding solace in items, products, and experiences that are more nostalgic, such as a book or a board game, and reminiscent of a simpler time in our lives.

This shift is at the heart of the megatrend Revivalism, which explains everything from our growing desire for less tech-enabled products, to the resurgent appeal of artisan crafts and iconic retro brands, to our desire to preserve our history and the simpler times and “good old days” it represents.

After 131 years in business, Eastman Kodak declared bankruptcy in 2012. Yet, since 2017, Kodak has been capitalizing on the growing desire for more analog experiences, as well as our good will for the brand by marketing its heritage and analog products heavily. It has relaunched its iconic Super 8 cameras, resumed production of its Ektachrome film for diehard enthusiasts, launched a print magazine called *Kodachrome* to celebrate “analog culture,” and partnered with a fashion retailer on a line of retro streetwear featuring its brand logo.

How to Use Revivalism

Share your history. Whenever possible, preserve and catalog your company’s history. One way to do so is to capture your employees’ stories about working at your company, building its products, and marketing them. These stories can offer a wealth of content that not only increases engagement with consumers but also yields company lore that contributes to culture building, recruiting and training efforts, and marketing and PR.

Offer a classic mode. Sometimes consumers want to downgrade the functionality in the products they buy. The best companies offer an easy way to do that. For example,

Just as we must serve as role models for our children, increasingly we will need to serve that same role for our technology as well.

whenever Microsoft launches a new operating system, it allows users to revert the interface to a classic view, one from the previous version they were used to.

Make your experience collectible. Part of the appeal of tactile products such as physical books or art comes from the human desire to collect things. We enjoy the sense of achievement when we complete a collection or add meaningful pieces to it. It is the reason that we love getting another stamp in our passports at immigration, or why we like buying products in sets rather than individually. Consider the aspects of your customer experience that you might be able to make collectible in print, so customers come back again and again to collect them.

Protective Tech

As we increasingly rely on predictive technology that keeps us and our world safe and makes life more convenient, we must contend with the privacy trade-offs required to make it work.

Smart, predictive technology not only helps us lead healthier, easier, safer, and more productive lives; it also helps us protect the environment and enjoy a more efficient society. However, the more we get used to these devices, the more blindly we rely on them, which has opened up all sorts of questions—from whether it's a good idea to let technology make certain decisions for us to whether we are leaving ourselves and our democratic process vulnerable to hackers, fraudsters, manipulators, and others who might wish us harm.

To understand what's at stake, there is perhaps no better place to start than health care, where striking the right balance between convenience and privacy can have life-or-death consequences. Facebook has been building tools that can detect content indicating that individuals might be considering harming themselves or others. The goal is for these tools to provide early warning signs to friends and family members so they can intervene quickly.

Health-tech startup FacePrint created a tool that can diagnose Parkinson's disease through using facial recogni-

tion software and was inspired by a high-school student's obsession with the work of psychologist Paul Ekman, who studied "micro-expressions."

This is the future of health care, where everything from your facial expression in a selfie to the data streams from a fitness tracker can be used to proactively improve your health, diagnose your ailments, and even predict suicide and intervene before it happens.

The tension between the desire for smart tech to help us manage our lives—in this case, our health—and our worry that it might infringe on privacy will only grow as this tech becomes more ubiquitous. It raises a natural question: Should we cede so many health and life decisions to machines?

How to Use Protective Tech

Be a role model for technology. As learning technology gets smarter, its evolution will largely come from watching humans and parsing the media that humans create—which leads to an unusual challenge for humanity. Just as we must serve as role models for our children, increasingly we will need to serve that same role for our technology as well.

Recognize and appreciate the protection. Many of the ways that technology protects us can become so well hidden that we forget to even acknowledge, appreciate, or value them. In the future, we will need to work harder to remain conscious of where technology offers this protection so we can avoid blind overreliance on it.

Demand more technology transparency. The more potential applications we see for Protective Tech, the more important transparency will become in terms of who has access to provide it on our behalf. The positive or negative benefits to society will increasingly depend on the mission and ethics of those who have earned (or demand) the right to access it.

Flux Commerce

Over the past decade, one of the most wide-ranging trends is the disruption not in what we choose to buy or who is selling it but how those products and experiences are bought and sold.

This megatrend, Flux Commerce, describes how successful companies are increasingly evolving their business models and distribution methods—aspects of the business that were once fixed—and changing how they innovate to keep up.

Capital One, for example, has been transforming bank branches into comfortable cafes and co-working spaces. Retail brands such as West Elm, Muji, Taco Bell, and Armani are all opening their own branded hotels, betting that customers who spend a night immersed with their products might buy more of them.

In the world of consulting, longtime players like IBM, Accenture, PwC, and Deloitte are hoping to make inroads into the marketing industry with their new interactive and creative services groups. Powerful media brands like *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *New York Magazine* have recently launched their own custom content studios where journalists work on the side to produce high quality content for brands.

How to Use Flux Commerce

Find the blur. As you think about how to transform your business strategy, consider what would happen if you put two unlikely models together. What if you sold cars the way that a donut shop sells donuts? Or what if Airbnb decided to start a pharmacy? These sorts of mind-bending questions encourage us to think outside our comfort zone and find new ideas in the “blur” between industries.

Be strategic, not reactive. Often, companies will mistake invention for innovation. This common mistake can lead to shallow ideation, one-dimensional product or service ideas, and undifferentiated engagement with your customers. Look beyond products to consider new business

models that integrate greater purpose and deliver more robust experiences that delight customers.

Seek out and support the innovators. Nearly every successful corporate effort dedicated to innovation finds new ways to bring in entrepreneurs as a first step. Sometimes this takes the shape of startup competitions or newer tactics like the “switch pitch,” where established brands pitch to startups the business challenges they face; then the startups partner with the brand to develop solutions. But first look inside your company. Find the employees who are devoted to innovation—and who are often overlooked.

Curating trends is certainly about seeing what others miss. But it’s also about developing a mindset of curiosity and thoughtfulness. It’s about moving from being a speed reader to being a “speed understander,” as Isaac Asimov wrote.

The future will belong to the non-obvious thinkers who use their powers of observation to see connections between industries, ideas, and behaviors and curate them into a deeper understanding of the accelerating present.

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Rohit Bhargava is on a mission to help the world be more open-minded by teaching others how to be non-obvious thinkers. He is the founder of the Non-Obvious Company and is an entertaining, original, and “non-boring” keynote speaker on innovation and trust. He is the number-one *Wall Street Journal* best-selling author of six books and has been invited to deliver keynote presentations in 32 countries around the world. His insights have been used by the World Bank, NASA, Intel, Disney, Colgate, Swissotel, Coca-Cola, Schwab, Under Armour, NBC Universal, American Express, and hundreds of others, to win the future.

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