

What comes *after* mind mapping?

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If you have been using “mind mapping” software in business for some time, you might be wondering what comes next. Is mind mapping the end of a journey, or the start of a new one?

“Mind mapping” software began to appear in the 1990’s with the advent of improved graphics on personal computers. In the early days, catching up with well-established mind mapping techniques was a technical challenge in its own right, but it soon caught the imagination of a generation of information professionals, and the software wagon accelerated faster than the horse. The wagon grew bigger and heavier, eventually overtaking the horse and heading off in a new direction with nobody at the helm, just the promise of an adventurous ride. And what a ride it is – the excitement of turning a jumble of random thoughts into a visible and coherent model is endlessly stimulating and highly addictive. Much has been written about the blindness to alternatives suffered by mind mappers, who seem to assume that anything and everything can and should be “mapped”. Some of the criticism is justified, but frankly, mind mapping software and its derivatives are in a league of their own if you want to get *seamlessly* from a blank page to a well-formed deliverable. Nothing else comes close. Just about every other toolset that you might consider contains technological compromises, is disjointed, or prioritises form over function. But with visualisation software, the form is the function.

Continuing our little analogy, the road along which the mind mapping software wagon travels is not a smooth one, nor do all its passengers enjoy the same scenery. Listening to their stories, they all have different hopes and fears. Some are dyed-in-the-wool mind mappers, who know that technology will never replace a physically and emotionally engaging technique. Some believe that better mind mapping skills will help them. Some went straight to software with no interest in or knowledge of mind mapping, and are no worse off for it. Others believe that mind mapping has no place in serious business. Some have been burned trying to raise interest beyond a small circle of colleagues. Some understand that deeper insight comes from designing tree diagrams, not mind maps. Some have spotted that

software entices you into creating large maps then offers few tools with which to curate the contents. Some have realised that they have ten years of intellectual hard work locked up in a syntax that only they have the key to, and nobody else can access. And some are not sleeping at night, because their employees have done exactly that.

Every single one of them is right. Nobody is “wrong” about their use of mind mapping software; it is a classic long-tail market. There are as many uses as there are users.

We can witness this lifecycle in e-mail, which is another technology-led solution. E-mail is technologically universal, but culturally very diverse. There are thousands of systems and vendors, but no single widely-adopted consensus on its use. Companies make up their own guidelines and try to educate their users. A few get desperate enough to impose martial law and curfews, because the mayhem caused by inconsiderate use harms communication instead of helping it. Mind mapping software will never be as widespread as e-mail, but this does not mean that it cannot fall down the same holes.

How should we continue our journey on the mind mapping software wagon?

We could wait and hope for better things, regress to the lowest common denominator, or adapt and grow with new techniques.

Software vendors focus on making things “easy”. There is nothing wrong with this priority – after all, they must sell software to survive. The danger lies in having little or no depth behind an inviting exterior – no space for growth and exploration. We must keep pushing the boundaries. Majorities are not always strengthened by eliminating minorities; it is the presence of the minority that defines the majority. You have to meet minorities part way, and interchange ideas to sustain progress. In a long-tail market, the body of knowledge lies with the users. And in this particular market, the users are some of the smartest around.

The lowest common denominator for mind mapping software is actually pretty low, and under-utilises many of the products on the market today. You can use it to **surf** waves of ideas, storms of information and transient situations, using rapid brainstorming and quick lists. “Vacation planners” spring to mind as a perennial example. Technology frames your methods, and there are no cultural considerations to worry about. There is distinct value in using it to surf. You don’t need to invest any design time to ensure that your maps make sense to non-participants, or even that *you* can navigate them again in two years. In fact, you hardly need a “save” button, because you won’t be coming back to them any time soon. You can afford to fly the map like a stunt pilot today, because there is no tomorrow.

But **building** information and knowledge bases with mind mapping software demands a different skill set and a different approach. Not only do you need a “save” button, smarter users will be looking for an “export” button too. There are three key challenges to address, none of which are to be found in the mind mapping literature, or in the documentation for software:

- Designing information for access by others
- Conceptually working with maps that are too big to be seen all at once
- Applying a tree-shaped analysis to a specific situation to achieve an outcome

Designing information for access by others means forgoing the indulgence of drawing what is in *your* mind, and making a serious effort to understand what it is in *their* minds instead. The map becomes a visual model of prioritised concepts designed around their knowledge and assumptions, not a virtuoso exhibition of yours. Conceptually, this is at odds with much of what mind mapping stands for, but mind mapping software neither knows nor cares – it is just as competent, especially with the presentation-quality graphics of most packages.

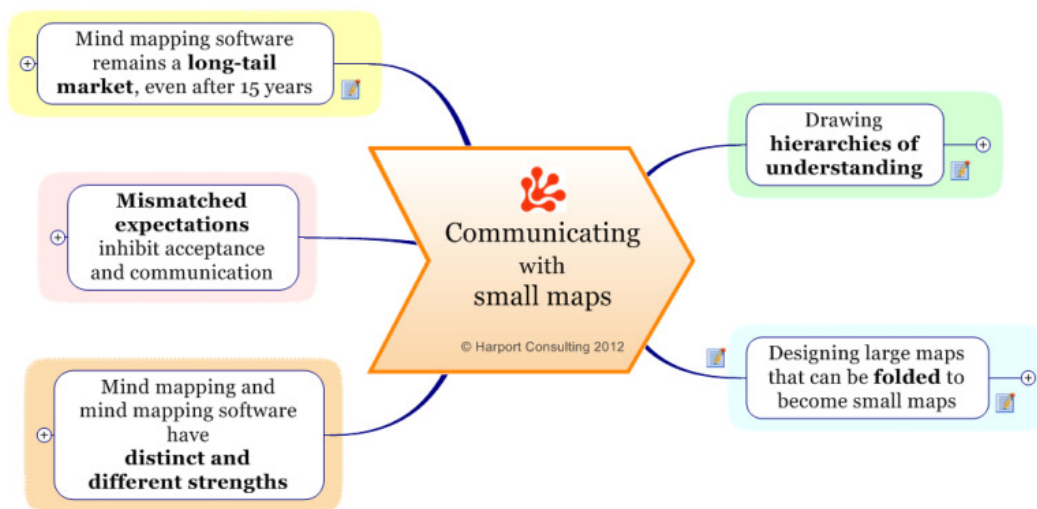
Working with maps that are too big to be seen all at once has never really been considered much of a problem with software. But exactly who thinks it’s not a problem? It’s the authors of the maps themselves, who are intimately familiar with the content, today at least. Beyond that, maps that are too big to be seen all at once speak volumes, not much of which is complimentary. Being able to recognise that problem is the first step in solving it.

Visualising important information and situations in trees is not a widespread skill. Mind mapping teaches us to start anywhere, throw stuff in and make connections. But visualising something in a tree, which mind mapping software is exceptionally good at, requires us to step back from the subject and think about the tree as a framework for prioritisation, not as a whiteboard without boundaries. In turn, this is derived from and visualises a guiding methodology in a clear and accessible way. It is no wonder that mind mapping software is so favoured by consultants and subject experts, even with the distracting preconceptions that its name can bring. Making maps that are easy to access and are usable over the long term requires a greater investment in design – not graphical design, but in defining the purpose, method and structure of maps. There are no shortcuts or wizards for this, yet.

Many users of mind mapping software have worked out how to do this stuff by themselves. For many, their software is their single most useful tool and the one that they turn to on a daily basis, if not an hourly basis. These are the early adopters whose

enthusiasm lit up the mind mapping software market, and who have the most to lose by regressing to the norm. Many companies have invested in software in the hope of enabling a step change in the sharing and management of intellectual property, but the diversity of practices, opinions and reactions around “mind map” visualisations has diluted the results and lowered expectations instead. Without some form of intervention and alignment, these investments risk being downgraded to expensive list-making software.

The worst case is that you are using mind mapping software to surf, but the people around you think you are using it to build trusted storage. This is a win/lose situation rather than win/win, resulting in compromises and scaled-back expectations.



A software map explicitly designed for communication

You may already be a mind mapper and are wondering what comes after mind mapping. Or maybe you never have been and never will be a mind mapper, which does not impact the value that you get from your software of choice. Either way, extending your skills in exploiting this versatile visualisation will greatly increase the long-term usability and value of the information in your maps, and will help others to benefit from the significant contribution that they can make to everyday business.

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