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Review: allCLEAR Legal Brainstorming

By Seth Rowland, Esq.

TechnoScore: 4.5

1 = Lowest Possible Score; 5 = Highest Possible Score

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INTRODUCTION

In a previous article, I reviewed [MindManager from Mindjet](#). MindManager enables the user to turn a MindMap on its side to build FlowCharts, and even export those charts to Microsoft Visio.

However, when it comes to rapidly mapping out complex, multi-step and branching processes, you are better served by adding [allCLEAR from Proquis](#) to your arsenal of tools.

allCLEAR's FlowCharter and Analyzer build process diagrams and enable you to evaluate multiple paths in the process to determine the optimal path. The FlowCharter builds tree diagrams and organization charts from a simple text editor in minutes, and then enables you to refine these charts with powerful graphic tools to get the precise look you need. Analyzer, enables you to then add data to each of the steps and branches in the chart for the purpose of finding all the paths through the process, and helps you calculate totals, averages, and probabilities.

FlowCharter costs \$315 for a PC License and \$457 for each concurrent network license. Analyzer (which includes FlowCharter) costs \$778 for a PC license and \$1,094 for each concurrent network license. A free 30-day trial is also available for download. The "concurrent network license" offers some real cost savings in a organization where several users need to build flowcharts on an occasional basis.

For this review, I received a free copy of the software and attended Web demos. I have no current relationship or affiliation with the vendor. I tested the software on a Pentium IV, 2.4 GHz desktop, with 2 GB RAM, running Microsoft Windows XP and

Microsoft Office 2003. There was more than enough power to run the program.

FLOW CHARTS AND PROCESS DIAGRAMS WITH ALLCLEAR

I used to view process maps and flowcharts as the domain of high-end programmers and engineers. These charts, replete with symbols, funny shaped boxes, arrows, and colors reminded me of the schematic diagrams of the circuit board of an old stereo.

By using a simple text editor, a user can diagram a complex process in minutes; allCLEAR handles all the graphics.

Over the years I played with organizational chart software programs, but found them of limited use in my law practice. I have dabbled with Microsoft Visio more recently, but found the templates very confusing and way too technical:

- Which box icons do I choose?
- How do I use branching logic?
- Why do I need this stuff?

In building automation systems for my clients, whether using HotDocs templates or Time Matters chains, I was forced to model "manual processes" with software. The simpler processes, I could describe in a few sentences or keep in my head. But for the more complex processes, I needed a way to visually represent each of the steps in the process

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and get my clients to approve the process before they invested in expensive programming time.

THE TOOL OF CHOICE

allCLEAR FlowCharter was recommended by my fellow consultant, [Wells Anderson](#). By using a simple text editor, a user can diagram a complex process in minutes; allCLEAR handles all the graphics. By using a simple syntax of periods, colons, question marks, parentheses, and square brackets, the system will automatically build the Flow Chart.

For example, take a client intake process. I have written the steps below, using basic punctuation and tabs, and pasted it into allCLEAR's text editor.

Client Intake Process

Cold Call:

(Answers) Sales Pitch.

(No Answer) Redial.

(Machine) Leave Message.

Followup Call.

Engagement Letter?

(Yes)Schedule Meeting.

Open new matter file.

Assign Paralegal

(No)Close Prospect

If you are a litigator wanting to evaluate the potential outcome of a litigation ... this may be the tool you have been waiting for.

Without any further work, I have an instant Flow-Chart. allCLEAR took each line above and put it in a separate shaped box. At the first colon (:) in "Cold Call:" it created 3 branching lines, with labels respectively of "Answers", "No Answer", and "Machine". It added "Followup Call" under the "Leave Message" box. It then closed the lines with "Engagement Letter?". At the question mark (?), it created a Yes/No branch. The Yes-branch had 3-steps in the process. The No branch had a single step.

If I added a square-bracketed label, e.g. [Label: ColdCall], I could then add a go-to line by elsewhere adding a [GoTo:ColdCall]. [Click here for a picture of an allCLEAR chart based on the above text.](#)

A picture is worth a thousand words. Such a chart works far better than a complex procedure manual (that no one reads anyway).

This is only the beginning of what allCLEAR can do. The system has a complete set of graphics tools. These tools work in a way that makes sense. Right click on "Engagement Letter?" in the chart your produced from this simple text entry and choose "Cluster Layout". You can change the structure to move the "No" answers to the side, and give the process a clearer vertical flow.

allCLEAR adds another layer to the graphics tools — the ability to add real data and analyze the process to determine the best outcome. Typically, this is done with two programs: one handling the graphics, and another which assigns probabilities and weights to each step, and calculates a probability of success and the cost of success.

By changing from text-view to data-view, you can get a list of all boxes in the flowchart. Using a spreadsheet, you can add additional fields to each box. You can, for example, add the "time" it takes to perform each task, the "cost" for each task, and any other factor you might wish to evaluate.

Once you enter the data, switch to an analyzer view. A range of options are only a few clicks away. The analyzer enables you to generate all the paths through the process and run simulations. You can choose the "play" button to play a designated path (to illustrate a point) or to play all paths to visually represent all the options.

Choose Tools -> Analyzer -> Probability and click on an branching decision point. You can assign a probability for each choice. Then you can run simulations, applying those probabilities and get the average cost, and average time for all the different paths.

If you are a litigator wanting to evaluate the potential outcome of a litigation, factoring dozens of different probabilities, this may be the tool you have been

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waiting for. Also, if you just want a way to visually illustrate different conclusions from the same facts in trying to build the “story” of the case, allCLEAR is a great brainstorming tool.

A FEW RESERVATIONS

While allCLEAR is an extremely powerful and well-designed program, it seems dated. The icons, colors and graphics seem circa Windows 2000. They don't have the Windows XP 3-D sculpted look, let alone the transparency for Windows Vista or the dynamic ribbon toolbars found in Office 2007.

With ten different toolbars, it can be confusing where to find a particular task. When the program begins, all toolbars are visible, but many are grayed out as inactive. Many toolbars and many items are only functional in certain contexts. One of the most powerful tools in the system is a button called “Artist”, a feature that appears on no menu. It is worth finding, for its effect on the process map is nothing short of stunning; by choosing a particular artistic vision, you can alter the entire layout of the process map.

Further, the program falls short on a number of keyboard-friendly conventions found in other programs. First, a number of functions appear to only be available through toolbar icons. For example, I could not access the “Artist” function from the Format -> Diagram menu. Second, the structure of the menus and toolbars should be consistent. For instance, the Format -> Drawing menu should match the Drawing toolbar in options. Third, while the program uses menu-accelerators, there are very few short-cut keys for commonly used actions.

WISH LIST FOR ALLCLEAR

Within a short time (either by reading the quick start guide or exploring) you will find your way around the program. Any questions can be answered with a search on an extensive set of user forums. allCLEAR is truly easy to use. I only wish that a little

extra time could be put into some of these aesthetic and usability issues.

I also wish the developers would build integration with Microsoft Visio. Some users have asked for the ability to export the allCLEAR diagram format (.acd) to Visio. Given the power of allCLEAR to build consistent and highly customized diagrams, I don't see this as a high priority. However, that same understanding could also be used to import Visio diagrams into allCLEAR. Once in allCLEAR they can be more easily manipulated with the FlowCharter, and then dramatically enhanced with the Analyzer.

CONCLUSION

On a scale of 1 to 5, I would give allCLEAR a TechnoScore of 4.5. It is an extremely powerful program, but has a little further to go on aesthetics and ease of use. allCLEAR is a productivity tool. Whether used for internal training manuals for staff and paralegals or used to illustrate a complex factual scenario, allCLEAR will save time and bring clarity to your process as a true brainstorming tool.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Recovered attorney Seth Rowland was named TechnoLawyer Consultant of the Year in 2002 for his contributions to TechnoLawyer on the subject of document assembly and law practice automation. He is a nationally known technologist whose company, [Basha Systems LLC](#), has helped many law firms and content providers build document assembly applications for both internal use and for resale. Please visit his [blog](#) for the latest on document assembly. Basha Systems uses pMachines' Expression Engine software for its office wiki and limits access only to members of the company.

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