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Review: Mapping the Legal Brain with MindManager

By Seth Rowland, Esq.

TechnoScore: 5

1 = Lowest Possible Score; 5 = Highest Possible Score

www.mindjet.com

INTRODUCTION: A LAWYER PROGRAMMER LOOKING FOR NEW TOOLS

As many of you know, I am a “recovered” lawyer. I am “recovered” from the approach to the legal business that views profit in terms of maximizing the number of hours charged to a client. As a legal technology consultant who designs and implements time-saving solutions for law firms, I have searched for brainstorming tools to help me in my work and to offer to my clients.

Over the past few months, I have evaluated two innovative tools: [MindManager from Mindjet](#) and [allCLEAR from Proquis](#) (the latter of which I’ll review soon). Mindjet is innovative in its use of branching trees, Webs, and flow diagrams to represent complex information visually. Much as the brain provides links between information, these programs enable the user to visually represent (and follow) those links to both better organize information and to reach conclusions.

In my work, we use these programs to design document assembly systems that produce dozens of documents from a single core interview. We also use these programs to develop and present Web-seminars, in the same way one might use PowerPoint, to visually represent the topics to be discussed in a lecture.

MindManager creates idea maps that enable you to link issues, facts, documents, and solutions in a multi-branching tree. The resulting outline can then be integrated into Microsoft Office, tied to events and tasks in Outlook, documents in Word, charts in Excel, and Web pages. You can export MindMaps to PowerPoint and Word, where you can edit them. Also, you can post dynamic maps to a Web site.

A single-user license for MindManager Basic 6 costs \$229. For tighter integration with Outlook and Microsoft Office, you should consider MindManager Pro 6 which costs \$349. There is also a Mac version, MindManager 6 Mac, which costs \$229. You can also download a free 30-day trial.

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For this review, I have 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. There are some special features of MindManager for Office 2007 that, unfortunately, I could not test.

IDEA MAPS WITH MINDMANAGER

In a typical litigation, a lawyer must sift through millions of bits of information, and extract from that information a “story.” This is the “story” that will be presented through documents, demonstrative exhibits, depositions, and live witness testimony to a judge and jury. The source information may be locked in documents, transcripts, legal memos found on a file-server, a Web server or locked in various databases.

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Currently, most people write memos on various topics in the litigation, and for each topic, conduct searches to find supporting information. Each memo “stands alone.” As facts change, you may or may not redraft the memo to reflect the new facts. Over a long litigation, you may have hundreds of memos to file.

Picture instead a single file (an idea map) that organizes all the theories of the case and includes hyperlinks to all the supporting documents and data sources. This idea map could include links to other idea maps. Rather than being a monstrous memo, the map visually represents all the theories of the case, and all the supporting evidence in a branching tree. Using a simple plus (+) and minus (-) you can expand and collapse each branch of the tree. You can reorder the branches in a priority. You can even assign tasks (and schedule them) to different branches.

MAPPING THE BRAIN WITHOUT A CAT SCAN

With MindManager you can brainstorm faster and more accurately because you can see both the forest, trees, and grass through a single interface; send that information to PowerPoint or Word, and roundtrip it. Whether you’re preparing for trial or deciding on a strategy for a complex negotiation, MindManager can map the roots and branches to an effective argument.

You start MindManager by choosing a template. The template sets the basic look of your map. Some prefer a “spider web” with spokes heading out from a central topic. Others prefer a fishbone: with branching topics descending left and right from an initial topic in the head. I prefer an elbow diagram, with subtopics branching out in a vertical list from an initial topic.

Once you choose a template, you can just type. When you use the enter key, it creates a new topic. When you use the insert key, it creates a subtopic. If you don’t like the order of your topics, you can use the mouse to drag the topic (and all the subtopics under it) to a different location in the map.

Using MindManager, I prepared the bullet points for a one-hour lecture in 15 minutes, including several

changes in the structure of the lecture as I thought through what I wanted to say. MindManager also has a “presentation mode” you can use in place of PowerPoint. [Click here to see the map in action](#) (you’ll need Internet Explorer).

MindManager can export a map to Word as an outline (using Heading and numbering styles). You can also export to PowerPoint. If your firm has a particular PowerPoint template, you can have a complete PowerPoint slide show with bullets, animation, links, and speaker notes in a matter of minutes.

A litigator might use MindManager to map out the evidence supporting a particular theory of the case.

The uses of MindManager are limited only by your imagination. A litigator might use MindManager to map out the evidence supporting a particular theory of the case. Each branch of the tree could represent a particular fact. For each fact, there could be links to supporting documents, pictures, testimony excerpts, and legal research. Taking it one step further, you could use that program to prepare a deposition outline. You could layout the topics to be covered. Under each topic, you could identify the line of questions. With respect to each question, you could have links to the documents, images, or excerpts you wish to present to the deposition witness during that particular question.

While you could export the map to Word and print it out, you might consider using MindManager live during the deposition. You could use the “links” to launch graphics for use in the deposition. For each topic, you could assign a “status” to indicate how well the topic was answered by the deponent. You could reorder the lines of questions with a click, and you can summarize the deponent’s response as notes on each question topic.

With its close links to Microsoft Office, MindManager can also serve as a project-manager. With a single

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click you can convert a topic on a map into an Outlook task and assign it to a member of your legal team. That said, MindManager is one of the few programs I know of that is truly “cross-platform”. Create a map on a P.C., and then open it on a Mac — no conversion required.

For teams distributed across multiple offices, you can send your MindMap with a free viewer. Better yet, you can post the map to a Web server. With a few lines of code on a Web page, you can make your map available for anyone visiting your Web site.

SOME MINOR RESERVATIONS

Sometimes you find a tool for which you have very little critical to say. MindManager has a very slick interface. The company has tightly integrated the software with Microsoft Office, including special integration into Office 2007 that enables you to design a map in MindManager, export it to Word for further editing, and then reimport it back into MindManager with full integrity. MindManager uses the WordML format to store information about the map which is not otherwise editable in Word.

That said, I have a few pet peeves. The export to PowerPoint is very effective. However, it presumes that “notes” are meant to be “speaker notes” rather than text that follows a bullet. It would be helpful to have an option to make the notes appear in the PowerPoint presentation as text following the bulleted topics.

The export to Word could also be a little more intuitive. Unless you have modified the default Heading 1, Heading 2 and Heading 3 styles in Normal.dot, the export will require extensive reformatting in

Word. A few more export options in MindManager might enable you to achieve the exact formatting without having to make style changes in Word. This would also have the added benefit, if and when, you decided to bring the Word outline back into MindManager.

CONCLUSION

On a scale of 1 to 5, I would give MindManager a 5. The technology is cutting edge. The program is simple to use and addictive, and few better writing and thinking tools exist. How many times have you stared for hours at a blank page? Those days are over. With MindManager, just toss out your ideas. With a mouse, you can drag the ideas into some useable order. And then send to Word.

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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 feel free to 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.

Contact Seth:
E: sgr@bashasys.com
T: (914) 827-9173

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