

Buyer's Guide to Brainstorming and MindMapping Tools

By Seth Rowland

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They say that lawyers are not visual people. Hogwash. We're all visual. No one's brain, legal or otherwise, works only in the linear, verbal realm. Thus, it's likely you could benefit from mindmapping (aka brainstorming) software. And who better to write a buyer's guide for you than lawyer and document assembly expert Seth Rowland who reviewed allCLEAR and MindManager respectively in two issues of this newsletter back in 2007. In today's TechnoFeature article, Seth moves beyond the product review to deliver for you at no charge a full-blown buyer's guide. Seth discusses nine features to consider when shopping. As a bonus, the appendix to this article lists 14 desktop software and six cloud (Web) products. Did Seth use mindmapping software to create this comprehensive buyer's guide. Need you ask?

INTRODUCTION

Chaos exists before order. Information without form. Inchoate ideas. Thoughts. Facts. Files. Fragments. Links. Photos. Videos. All of these items hover in the immediate present, just a few clicks away, the sheer volume overwhelming. So many thoughts; so many facts; so many ideas; so many tasks. And yet ... no order.

In this chaos we find it difficult to solve problems effectively. It is hard to focus, and even harder to come up with a creative thought or even to

organize your thoughts. In a world with information overload, how can you communicate effectively and present your ideas? How can you plan a strategy, identify its elements, assess best practices, and assign tasks and priorities? How can you provide clarity and direction?

While divine intervention may offer a solution for some (even among the nonreligious — think the nine muses), many lawyers have taken matters into their own hands with mindmapping tools and processes.

First, we used index cards. Then outliners as Yvonne Renfrew discussed in her recent SmallLaw column, Revisiting the [Super PIM](#). Back in 1980, I put myself through law school using a product developed by Neil Larson called [MaxThink](#). MaxThink was (and remains) a visual outliner with which you create branches and trees with ENTER and INSERT commands, and move outline trees and branches with an arrow key. I organized all of Criminal Procedure into a single outline, and obtained a top grade in the course. MaxThink enabled me to easily define the "key issues" and "key facts," and develop a tool that enabled me to retrieve that information in a timely fashion for the exam. It allowed me to focus on the details of the trees and then step back and see the forest.

Since that time, outliners have evolved, along with word-processors to become more "visual."

The simple tree and branch "list" became an actual tree on a page with text bubbles and real tree branches. In the transition from "idea processor" to "visual processor" these outlines have morphed into presentation tools, scenario analyzers, and project managers. Moreover, from the work of a lone thinker working in isolation, these tools have evolved to handle teams of thinkers working in collaborative workspaces. It is this family of products that I will cover in this issue of [TechnoFeature](#).

If you have never worked with a mindmapping tool, you owe it to yourself to take one for a test drive.

As you read this article realize that many of these products have devoted "fan clubs." There are "gurus" like [Tony Buzan](#), [Steven Covey](#), and [David Allen](#) — highly-paid motivational speakers, whose products embody special design philosophies on how best to optimize the potential of the human brain. There is even a blog, [Mindmappingsoftwareblog.com](#) devoted to this software.

NINE KEY FEATURES OF MODERN MINDMAPPING SOFTWARE

These tools are now called by the fancier terms of "brainstorming"

or “mindmapping” or “visual processor.” They come in many flavors. At their root is a principle that the human brain can only process a limited set of options at one time, and that the brain responds best to visual stimuli.

Mindmapping tools mimic the human brain by organizing information into “lists” or “branches,” and then grouping these lists into a hierarchy (the outline tree). Modern mindmapping tools go further, enabling you to establish connections between the branches in one tree with certain branches in another tree. By focusing on content over format, these tools enable you to “think” faster and more efficiently.

Mindmapping tools range from free (and open source) up to \$1,000 per user for analytical tools. In deciding which tool to use, I recommend that you download a free trial and take the software for a spin. Most vendors have online videos that take you through the basics. These tools are designed to be fast and fun. You can perform most of your work with the INSERT, ENTER and arrow keys. In evaluating products you should understand the features described below and decide which of them are most important to you. Generally, the more you pay the more features you get.

1. Brainstorming

The core of mindmapping software is brainstorming. It is important to be comfortable with how the software lets you add new items to your outline. If you are a keyboard person like me who hates using the mouse, it will be important that the software have a full range of keyboard shortcuts

to both enter information as well as to navigate the map.

Differences exist in the “visual metaphor” of the mindmap. Some of the differences in layout and template have to do with presentation. However, others serve as aids in thinking. The separation of “layout” from information distinguishes mindmapping tools from mere word-processors. Programs like [MindManager 9](#) offer several distinct views of the same data: map, outline, Gantt (project timeline), slides (PowerPoint), and Walk Through (presentation mode). Map shapes and lines can be changed by “map styles” and “design templates.”

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2. Information Mapping

Order emerges from chaos via the map, one link at a time. In preparing for this article, I made a map using MindManager. I created an entry for Software. As I surfed, I added products to the map. For each product I add links to the pages on features, pricing, and video tutorials. I also added my first impressions of the products. As I conducted my survey, I started categorizing the products into “Open source,” “Desktop,” and “Online.” I changed the rankings by reordering products. I added information on product history. I highlighted distinguishing features and added a few images. At

the end of a few hours, I had a fairly comprehensive map of the entire industry. And, with a few clicks of the map, I could find further product details that I needed as I wrote this article.

Mindmaps are superior note-taking tools because you can “organize” and “categorize” as you take notes. Information is not linear. In the Web-connected world, there are no textbooks that distill the information. Rather, we have a sea of disconnected information from which we must make sense. We need to examine the grass, picture, tree, and then flyover the forest, all at the same time to make sense out of the information.

Mindmaps also enable you to make “connections” between disparate information. For example, [PersonalBrain](#) embodies the focus on “connections” or what Neil Larson, creator of Houdini, called “information annealing.”

With PersonalBrain and its online counterpart, [TeamBrain](#), you can make unlimited connections between any points in the map. You can then choose a point in the map and produce an “ancestor” or inputs tree and a “child” or outputs tree. With other programs you can draw hyperlinks between different branches and even points in other maps.

3. Presentations

Mindmaps are not just for personal brainstorming. Increasingly, they have become presentation tools to persuade team members or clients to follow a particular strategy. In this light, they have become presentation tools. MindManager

has a “presentation mode” that lets you step through the map in “order,” telling a story about the information therein.

Most of the higher-end mapping tools export to a number of formats, including Word, PowerPoint, and Excel to include the results of the map in a format for others to use. Many ship with appealing design templates. [MindView 4](#) has dozens of design templates and lets you preview the outputs before you export.

Some products focus almost exclusively on presentations and communications. [SmartDraw VP](#) is a mindmapping tool at its core, but pitches itself as the first “Visual Processor.” It sees itself as a communication enhancer, letting you build dynamic and informative presentations that are “visual” and informative.

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4. Strategy Planning

You can use maps to set forth a strategy. Only a few of programs allow you to assess which strategy is the best, and provide backup statistics. [allCLEAR Analyzer](#) enables you to create a flow chart and assign data and probabilities to the different branches of the flow chart. From these it can statistically tell you which route on the flow chart is cheaper and which more expensive.

Other products, like [Mindview 4](#) offer the ability to embed data on different branches of the tree, including variables and calculations, and export the data into Excel charts.

5. Task Management

A natural next step from brainstorming is task management — the ability to assign tasks to team members and track their progress. Typically, certain branches of the tree are designated as “tasks” and assigned to a “resource” or person. Using icons or other tools, you can track the progress of each item towards completion. In some programs, these tasks are integrated with Microsoft Outlook and show up on the team member’s calendar. In [MindManager](#), the “progress” on a given task can “roll up” to a parent topic. In this guise the mindmap both defines and manages the project. In a “collaborative” environment, the whole team has access to the map either through a file server or through a web server.

6. Export/Import

Most mindmaps organize items well. Most facilitate links and embedding images and documents. What you get when you spend a little more money is the ability to move the information on the map both into and out of the program. You may have information in a structured Word document. [MindManager](#) allows you import that document and convert it into [MindManager](#) outline. You can make changes and then export the document back, fully formatted. If you are working with teams or giving presentations, you will want to

look closely and the Import/Export features of the product and the included layout templates.

If you want to open up the map to the team to edit, you will need a collaboration platform.

7. Project Management

Those who manage projects will understand and value this feature. Those who work alone won’t care. If you are working with a team of people, the ability to view a mindmap as a GANTT chart is invaluable. It allows you to map out the tasks and phases quickly. And then lets you plan out the order in which tasks are completed, how long they will take, any dependencies, and who will perform the work. Previously, you needed Microsoft Project, a fairly expensive and difficult program to master. [MindManager](#) and [MindView](#) and other programs in their premium editions now include project management.

8. Mobile Apps

Many lawyers have an Android smartphone or iPhone, and perhaps an iPad too. If so, it’s important that maps created on your PC or Mac can be viewed and ideally edited on these devices. Check on whether the software you’re evaluating has a corresponding Android or iOS app and how well it interacts with the desktop software. In practice, you may spend more time on the mobile version than you will on the desktop version.

9. Collaboration

Just as you need to manage a team, you may also need to work with a team. The name of the game is collaboration. If you want to open up the map to the team to edit, you will need a collaboration platform.

There are two approaches to collaboration. One approach is to work with a desktop client and host the map files on a shared server. Team members can then “synchronize” changes on their personal version of the map with those on the hosted server. This approach is used by Mindjet Catalyst, [TeamBrain](#), and others.

The other approach is to build a Web application that requires no client installation. All the maps and the tools are hosted and provided together as a service for a monthly subscription. This approach is followed by [MindMeister](#), [Bubbl.us](#), [Mind42.com](#), and [Mindomo 6](#). For fees ranging from free to \$20 per month, you can work in a web space and collaborate with others on maps and projects.

The trend towards collaboration is welcome, and the web sites facilitating these collaborations are good. But look closely at the feature set. Make sure you can export your maps into a usable format and conversely that you can bulk import data. Realize that web applications lack many formatting, layout, and template options, as well as some of the live connections to Outlook and databases, GANTT charts and analytic tools. Also, check the privacy terms of your host. As a lawyer, you don’t want your work product shared with the wrong people. Mindjet will soon launch Mindjet Connect, incorporating the collaboration tools from a recent acquisition of Cohuman.

CONCLUSION

If you have never worked with a mindmapping tool, you owe it to yourself to take one for a test drive. The names of all software products and web services mentioned in this article as well as some others are listed below (if I have omitted a product that you use let me know). If you currently use a mindmapping tool, update to the current version, and take a

look at the features videos. You may find that you are underusing the product. Look for the features discussed in this article. If you find a key feature lacking, check out some of the other products. It is time to bring order to chaos.

DESKTOP MINDMAPPING PRODUCTS

[MindManager 9](#)
[Mindview 4](#)
[NovaMind Platinum](#)
[PersonalBrain](#)
[MindMapper 12](#)
[XMind Pro](#)
[SmartDraw VP](#)
[MindGenius 4](#)
[AIICLEAR](#)
[Seavus DropMind 2.4](#)
[Inspiration 9](#)
[iMindMap 5](#)
[FreeMind Open Source](#)
[MindVisualizer Standard](#)

CLOUD-BASED MINDMAPPING PRODUCTS

[Mindjet Catalyst](#)
[TeamBrain](#)
[MindMeister](#)
[Bubbl.us](#)
[Mind42.com](#)
[Mindomo 6](#)

Seth Rowland was named TechnoLawyer Consultant of the Year in 2002 for his achievements in document assembly and law practice automation, including helping countless law firms directly as a consultant and indirectly through his contributions to TechnoLawyer. 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 the [Basha Systems Blog](#) for the latest on document assembly.

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