

MIND MAPPING

Grappling with a highly intricate problem? Need to explain a complicated set of interrelated data to others? Help get your message across with a mind map, a diagram of the reasoning going on in your head.

by Robert Abbott

Ever been on a project where you had trouble keeping all the “if” questions straight? “If this happens,” you say, “we’ll do one thing. But, if that happens, we’ll do something else instead, but only on a Wednesday.”

In cases like these, especially with high stakes, you may have drawn a diagram on a piece of paper. That way you could visualize the forks in the path ahead, while still seeing the objective at the end.

Diagrams map our reasoning and can be as simple as a few lines on a napkin, or as complex as computer models. Called mind maps, these diagrams help us make better decisions, or make difficult decisions more easily.

But, let’s also think of them as a system for better communication. Sometimes a picture really is worth a thousand words, as the saying goes.

Mind mapping helps us communicate in at least three ways: to illustrate the components of complex situations; to show the outcomes of a series of actions; and to highlight otherwise unrecognized linkages.

Whenever I redesign my website, I’m dealing with a complex situation. So, I draw a simple diagram, with boxes representing pages and lines showing their connections. It’s only a modestly complex website, but keeping track of the hierarchy and connections can drive me crazy.

So, you can imagine how hard it is, not only to work with a more complex situation, but also explaining it to someone else. However, a simple visual outline of the components and their relationships can effectively communicate even the most Byzantine of structures.

You can also apply mind maps to track the outcomes of a series of actions.

By way of an example, some manufacturers of consumer products wonder about selling directly to consumers on the Web. First they ask themselves whether or not they think such an initiative would be profitable. Second, if it will be profitable, how much will they have to spend, and how long will it take? And the list goes on.

By now, though, you’re getting the picture. One thing depends on another, and the answer to it depends on the answer to a previous question. Mind maps illustrate the actions and consequences, and give us a way to forecast possible outcomes.

Now, let’s turn to highlighting unrecognized linkages. One of my former newsletter clients is a major printing company, and part of our newsletter mandate involved explaining changes in the work world to employees.</P

On some occasions we found it helpful to create diagrams of the forces behind the changes, and of our responses to them. We might show how technology relates to globalization, for example, without overwhelming our readers with words and abstract concepts.

In summary, mind mapping, or diagramming our reasoning, helps us communicate by simplifying complex situations, showing the possible consequences of a series of decisions, and highlighting linkages among seemingly unconnected events or players.