
Mind mapping your way to a better career

David Pollitt

News section Editor – Career Development International, Bradford, UK

Keywords

Learning styles, Psychology

Abstract

Explains the theory of mind mapping, how to construct a mind map and the situations in which it may be useful. Highlights the effectiveness of the technique in getting to the heart of a matter. Shows how it can be used to improve note-taking and presentations, and to make meetings more effective. Concludes by examining the potential uses of mind mapping in life-management.

How to make a mind map

“I’ve a grand memory for forgetting,” nineteenth-century Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote. Now such a claim is backed up by twenty-first century scientific evidence.

Studies of memory indicate that the brain will forget 80 per cent of detail within 24 hours of having learned it, and 99 per cent within two weeks. One of the greatest demotivators for an individual is to learn appropriate information, then “lose” almost all of it within a fortnight. Imagine how your career could develop if you could improve your retention rate.

Vanda North, who speaks for Buzan Centres Ltd, Poole, Dorset, UK, believes that mental literacy, the skill of learning how to learn and understanding the principles on which our major thinking functions are based, offers a way forward.

The brain’s range of cortical skills includes word, imagination, number, rhythm, spatial awareness, logic, analysis, linearity, *Gestalt* (a system of thought that regards all mental phenomena as being arranged in patterns or structures perceived as a whole and not merely as the sum of their parts) and association. The more these are used in combination, the more enhanced all performance becomes.

The mind map is one way of integrating many of the brain’s learning skills and principles. By combining the full range of the brain’s cortical skills, the mind map can enhance creativity, memory and co-operation, and make it easier for people to envision goals, change habits, monitor progress and improve learning. The mind map can also facilitate clarity and quality of thinking.

Making a mind map is a fairly straightforward eight-part process:

- 1 Arm yourself with blank sheets of A3 or A4 paper and lots of coloured felt-tip pens.

- 2 Relax, get into the right frame of mind for new, creative thought, and suspend belief in your inability to draw.
- 3 Select your keyword or image – for example, “business trip” – and write or draw it in the centre of your page.
- 4 Branch off any ideas related to this central theme, such as “travel”, “preparation”, “food”. Include thoughts that may seem obscure or irrational – they will give you a fresh perspective on your subject.
- 5 Use one colour for each branch, with sub-branches flowing off from the centre, continuing until you have exhausted all possible links.
- 6 Condense your thoughts to one word per line, so you are free to make a greater number of connections.
- 7 Use images instead of words whenever possible, and draw boxes around, or otherwise highlight, important information. The more imaginative and colourful the mind map, the more you will remember what is on it.
- 8 When you have exhausted the subject, edit and regroup your notes on a fresh sheet in order to produce your final, master mind map.

Vanda North believes that, by reflecting the natural architecture of the brain, a mind map is a way of planning and structuring thought to allow a rapid but profound exploration of ideas, while simultaneously maintaining clear focus on a central issue. By incorporating the use of shapes, colours and dimensions as visual stimulants, the mind mapping technique helps people to challenge assumptions, break out of conventional thinking and make the most of their mental resources in a structured way.

The most obvious use of mind mapping is in decision making, but it has a range of other uses.

© David Pollitt



Career Development
International
8/5 [2003] 253-256

MCB UP Limited
[ISSN 1362-0436]

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister>



The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/1362-0436.htm>

Getting to the heart of the matter

One study has suggested that people who cannot read at 400 words a minute in the modern world are functionally illiterate. Material comes at them faster than they can process it. Most people read at about 200 words a minute, but can be trained to read at 1,000 words a minute.

Vanda North advises people to start to spot keywords when they are listening to a lecture or reading a book that they need to learn and remember. The keywords are the ones that, when repeated, bring back all the associated items around them. In normal writing and sentences, only 5 to 10 per cent of the words are keywords. They tend to be the nouns and strong verbs that convey solid images. If a person really wants to remember something, he or she should then review it with a mind map.

Effective note-taking

Mind maps can help people to take more effective notes. Vanda North outlines the eight basic steps:

- 1 Very quickly browse or look through the entire book or article, getting a general feel for the way in which it is organized.
- 2 Work out the length of time to be spent studying and determine the amount of material to be covered in that time.
- 3 Mind map what you already know in that subject area in order to establish associative mental "grappling hooks".
- 4 Define your aims and objectives for the study session and complete a different mind map of all the questions that need to be answered.
- 5 Take an overview of the text, looking at the table of contents, major headings, results, conclusions, summaries, major illustrations or graphs, and any other important elements that catch your eye. This process will give you the central image and main branches of your new mind map of the text. Many students report that they have often completed 90 per cent of their learning task by the time they finish the overview stage. By focusing on the overall structure and major elements of the text, the author's essential ordering impetus rapidly becomes clear and can easily be mind mapped.
- 6 Now move on to the preview, looking at all the material not covered in the overview, particularly the beginnings and ends of paragraphs, sections and chapters, where

the essential information tends to be concentrated. Add to your mind map.

- 7 The next stage is the inview, in which you fill in the bulk of the learning puzzle, still skipping over any major problem areas. Having familiarized yourself with the rest of the text, you should now find it much easier to understand these passages and bulk out the mind map.
- 8 Finally, there is the review stage, in which you go back over the difficult areas you skipped in the earlier stages and look back over the text to answer any remaining questions or fulfil any remaining objectives. At this point you should complete your mind map notes.

The process, says Vanda North, can be likened to building a jigsaw puzzle, beginning by looking at the complete picture on the box, then putting in the corners and outside edges, and gradually filling in the middle until you have a complete replica.

Mind mapping meetings

With increasing business emphasis on quality and teamwork, it seems that more time than ever is being spent in meetings. Too often, participants conclude that these are "time-wasting", "boring", "frustrating" or "useless". Vanda North outlines how mind maps can help to make meetings more enjoyable and productive.

First, set up a large white board on which, during the course of a week, all people who will attend the meeting can contribute to a mind map outlining the main issues for discussion. Ask team members to send in miniature mind maps with their own agenda items. Aggregate these at the end of the week, and make a copy for everyone. This becomes the agenda.

Second, encourage the administrator responsible for considering and handling all the details to capture, track, complete and evaluate the entire process through a generic mind map.

During the meeting itself, the mind map agenda can be shown on a white board, given to each member or projected on screen from an OHP or computer.

The group should decide how long each topic will be discussed, and should set a timer. If a person seems to wander off the topic, ask which branch of the mind map he/she is referring to. If none, note the topic for another meeting. If a person says what he or she has said before, ask if the keywords cover it or whether more needs to be said. A tick or initials can quickly indicate when

someone wants to agree with something that has already been said.

Mind maps have various uses when creating the minutes, says Vanda North. One person can officially mind map the minutes on a white board so that everyone can see and confirm their accuracy as the meeting progresses. Mind maps can be collected and shown on a projected computer screen. Each person may take his/her own mind map minutes.

Communicating the results of the meeting can also be done in various ways. Some groups may choose to place the white board in a communal room for all to see and follow the necessary actions, while others may prefer to make hard copies of the mind map.

Mind maps can be used to complete the relevant actions. Each major theme branch (or even sub-level word) may be a general focus for a person, team or department, who may make it the centre of his or her own mind map to add a greater level of detail. One mind map can show the date by which each activity is to be completed, and even the flow or order of activities. The mind map acts as a gentle reminder for everyone as to who needs to do what, and by when. Greater satisfaction arises as items are completed and ticked off. Any problem areas can be rolled over for agenda items for the next meeting.

People mind mapping meetings report stronger team support and shared responsibility. If one member is unable to complete an action, and others are aware of its implications, they are more likely, as a group, to seek a solution.

In lengthy meetings, or meetings held over months or years, it is important to keep the main mission or goal in mind. A mind map can help to keep everything in focus.

Making presentations

A further use of mind maps, says Vanda North, is in helping people to make effective presentations.

A speaker should capture all his/her initial thoughts about what he/she is going to say regardless of importance or order on a single piece of paper. Then he/she should do something different for a while, before returning to add extra thoughts and to form an initial mind map. Ideally, the person should then sleep on the matter before doing the first level of organizing and editing.

The mind map should be considered from the point of view of: the audience's needs, interests and background knowledge; where the presentation will take place; how long it is likely to be; and where, in the schedule of

the whole proceedings, the presentation will fall.

The speaker should then decide on the best starting point and what will make an emphatic end. An important statement can be reiterated throughout the talk, and surprise or keywords used to help the audience remember the main points. The rest of the sub-topics should then be ordered in a logical fashion.

The mind map, clearly rewritten and drawn, becomes the speaker's guide through his or her presentation. As a rough guide, says Vanda North, one word or image on a mind map equals about a minute of talking.

Mind maps can help to cut preparation time, enable the structure of the talk to be maintained while facilitating the flexibility of words or time or emphasis, reduce the fear of presenting, help the presenter to maintain eye contact with the audience and provide an increased feeling of confidence.

Life management

Vanda North explains how mind mapping helps her to manage the various aspects of her life. She divides her life into three main geographic sections – the UK, where she has a flat and office, the USA, where she also has a flat and office, and the rest of the world, where she makes regular visits. She also has three main attention areas herself (keeping her life in line with her vision), her family and friends and her work.

She begins each morning by mind mapping all the things that have been popping into her head during the previous night. She updates this when she arrives at the office, taking account of what has come into her mind on her daily commute. She tries to achieve some basic ordering of her ideas, but always has a "miscellaneous" section for things that do not easily fit elsewhere.

She then looks at her schedule for the day and decides how much flexible time she will have and how comfortable she feels with her list of tasks for the day. She considers whether there is anything she can ditch or delegate, and is then left with what she has to do.

She organizes the "to do" items in three ways: items that are part of making her vision become a reality are given top priority; items that fit into the flow of the day and would cause least disruption get second priority; and items that match the "curve of her energy" whether high or low in relation to how much energy is needed by the things she has to do get a priority three rating.

David Pollitt
*Mind mapping your way to a
better career*

Career Development
International
8/5 [2003] 253-256

She sets blocks of time to achieve her goals. She then uses a timer to measure the blocks of time. She clumps activities together by, for example, doing all the telephone calls, writing all the letters, dealing with all the e-mail in one go. If possible, she concentrates most into the time of day (or night) that is best for her. She takes regular breaks to help to keep her energy high. She also keeps back small tasks such as tidying a drawer to carry out during some of her breaks.

Vanda North also plans for interruptions – and if these do not occur, finds herself with a pleasing unexpected oasis of time. She questions the real urgency of matters that

other people raise during the course of the day, and is not afraid to ask for help.

She guards against allowing the everyday matters to fill her day, week, month, year and life, and regularly reviews and updates her goals, and measures progress towards them.

Vanda North's clients include American Express, BT, Exxon, Siemens Nixdorf and the Wellcome Foundation.

(This article was written by David Pollitt, Career Development International News-section editor, from articles written by Vanda North that originally appeared in Training & Management Development Methods.)