

Mind Tools

Loading Zone

November 2005 • Vol.5 Issue 11

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Software For Your Brain



Popularized in computing and IT, the phrase “like nailing jelly to a tree” can also be used to describe dealing with ideas that are nebulous and hard to get a grasp on. If the ideas you’re trying to sort out are crucial to getting a project done, you’ll need all the help you can get. A line of software products called mind tools, or idea-mapping software, may be just what you need.

Mind-tool programs are like a cross between a flowcharting application and an outline generator. You throw in a bevy of unorganized ideas, which you can then shape graphically by grouping and linking associated notions in a chart. This makes it easier to wrap your mind around complicated groups of ideas with many subdivisions instead of plowing through an itemized list.

I examined three mental-organization tools: MindManager X5 Pro, a professional-level product; MindMapper 4.5, a more entry-level application; and FreeMind, a freeware/open-source program. (MindManager and MindMapper have 30-day trial versions available.)

■ **MindManager X5 Pro**

\$296.65 (single-user edition; volume discounts available)

Mindjet

www.mindjet.com

CPU Rating: 4.5



MindManager’s interface lets you concentrate on organizing your ideas instead of fussing with program settings.

MindManager is both the most powerful and most expensive of the programs I examined. That said, anyone who needs a truly professional-level idea-mapping

tool will find their money well-spent.

MindManager's edge is twofold. One, it has an outstanding user interface, so you spend less time wrestling with the program and more time actually collating ideas. Two, it integrates broadly with third-party applications—not just Microsoft Office, but other apps often used by those who use mind tools in the first place such as SalesForce.com.

You will probably want to start with the program's Brainstorm mode. Here, you just type in as many ideas relevant to your topic as possible, in no particular order, and then organize them into tentative categories and hierarchies. As you get a better grip on the topic and move things around, an idea keyword might become a category or vice versa. The more you work with it, the more the ideas organize themselves and shake themselves out. (The one hard part of the program is the object styling tools; see the review of MindMapper for a comparison of details.)

There are other ways to view the map, too. Outline mode most directly resembles the outline function in Word and PowerPoint. Presentation turns the whole map into a PowerPoint-like presentation, unfolding each node of the map like a flower blooming to illustrate each idea. It's better than going a slide at a time because you can always see the whole thing at a glance.

You can link and manipulate multiple maps together and in groups (a multimap), and you can also make links to external files or URLs. One handy feature is a Repair Broken File Hyperlinks tool, which iterates through all external links in the document and ensures they're still valid.

MindManager's integration with Office works a number of different ways. Aside from being able to export maps to apps such as Word or PowerPoint, you can import a Word outline into MindManager as a map, synchronize a map's to-do and completion data with a Project timeline and even synchronize contact data stored in a map with Outlook. Another package lets you integrate with the SalesForce.com's line of CRM products, a powerful feature only this program supports.

You can export a finished map in a wide variety of formats: Web pages (in either a static or dynamic, CSS/DHTML-driven style), bit-mapped images, Metafile vector images, XML, and many more. The Pack And Go feature compiles the map file and any externally linked files into one self-extracting ZIP archive (no ZIP utility needed).

■ **MindMapper 4.5 Pro**

\$179.95

SimTech Systems

www.mindmapper.com

CPU Rating: 4



MindMapper isn't quite as polished and upmarket a program as MindManager, but it's a lot more affordable (\$179 to MindManager's \$299) and most of its functions are comparable to MindManager.

Start the program and you'll see a map with links to the program's how-to tutorials. These tutorials are among the program's best features. If you know nothing about how idea-management software works, you can fire up a Flash-based tutorial that walks you through how to create a map and populate it, how to work in outline mode, and how to do advanced grouping and linking among objects.

MindMapper actually has a few features MindManager does not. For one, you can view the outline and map view for a given map simultaneously in side-by-side panels. Click a node in the outline view and it assumes focus in the map, with all lower-level nodes in the tree temporarily removed from view. This is a nice way to drill into a map and look only at what you need.

It's also easy to modify the general look of the map. With one click you can choose whether subjects radiate outward from the central node, appear in a tree next to it, or are arranged in some other fashion. MindManager has similar object-styling tools, but they're a little less straightforward to use at first glance; you have to create general styles and then apply them (or use a pregenerated style), and the style-creation tool is a little arcane.

MindMapper's presentation mode has some nice commonsense touches: For one, you can open a pane that shows a preview of what the automatically generated slide view of the presentation will look like. There's less integration with other programs, but the integration features are unique; for instance, the Auto Paste Mode (used with Word) lets you select blocks of text and convert them automatically into new nodes in the map. You can also import and turn PowerPoint documents into diagrams.

The program's export functions let you save a map to most common graphics files, XML, and of course HTML. Exporting a map to HTML produces a simple two-panel document with a tree diagram in the left-hand pane. Click any of the nodes in the tree and the node, with all relevant links and other features, appears in the right-hand pane.

■ FreeMind 0.8

Free/open source

freemind.sourceforge.net

CPU Rating: 2.5



As the name might imply, FreeMind is a freeware/open-source idea-mapping tool written in Java to run nearly anywhere (Windows, Linux, and OS X packages are available). The feature set is nowhere nearly as robust as the other programs discussed here; there isn't any integration with external programs, and the UI isn't that sophisticated. However, it's free, and for people looking to get their hands on an idea-mapping tool just to learn the road, it's not a bad place to start. It's also continuously evolving, so many of the criticisms I have here are slowly being addressed.

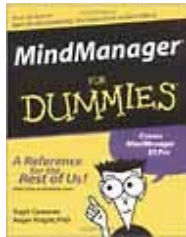
The user interface is simple enough: Like the other programs described here, it surrounds the map with a number of toolbars with various functions. You can mark map nodes with icons or surround selected nodes with a cloud to indicate a common association. If you don't like where a node is positioned, you can drag it around, and also control the direction of branching for a particular child node. Right-clicking a node and then dragging to another node creates an arrow link, and you can also manipulate the path of the arrow to keep it from being overwritten by other elements.

FreeMind does have a few features that the other programs lack. The most notable is the ability to create password-encryptable nodes. Most of the good features are things found in other programs, but implemented well, for instance, automatic formatting of the map or being able to track revisions to nodes. You can import maps created in MindManager X5 into FreeMind with most of the map features kept intact. You also can export maps (or parts of maps) to dynamic or static HTML, an OpenOffice document, or a static image.

There are still some things missing, though. There isn't a real presentation mode, and the program lacks productivity functions such as task assignments or calendaring. Still, it's hard to argue with the price tag, and the program's amazingly rapid development is worth watching. When version 1.0 hits, it should be a keeper. ■

by Serdar Yegulalp

MindManager For Dummies



If you're still confused about mind mapping, consider "MindManager for Dummies." Aside from covering the feature set of MindManager in its Standard, Business, and Enterprise releases, there are detailed real-world examples of how to communicate ideas with the program.

The History Of The Mind Map

Mind maps are one of the many ways you can represent ideas, and representing ideas symbolically goes hand-in-hand with the history of the human race. Porphyry, a Greek thinker of the 3rd century B.C., devised one of the earliest versions of the mind map to illustrate the concept categories formulated by fellow philosopher Aristotle. That said, mind maps themselves are a relatively new invention (circa 1960 or so), spawned from the convergence of several ways of representing ideas.

The Venn diagram. In the 19th century, British mathematician John Venn created the Venn diagram as a way to graphically represent relationships among sets of things. Mind maps aren't Venn diagrams per se, but they use one of the key conceits of Venn diagrams: that you can group related ideas together spatially. MindManager and MindMapper both make explicit use of this concept by letting you create clouds of related ideas on your map.

The concept map. An early version of the mind map, called a concept map, was originally developed by learning experts in the 1960s as a way to facilitate learning. One of the widely touted advantages of the mind map, which comes directly from concept maps, is that it uses both sides of the brain at once (the perceptive and analytic halves) and therefore engages the brain more completely. (This hasn't yet been borne out by study, possibly because mind-mapping is still a relatively new technique, but it's an intriguing notion.)

The flowchart. Originally pioneered by 20th century efficiency experts and computer scientists, flowcharts became a popular way to show how you could do a particular thing. Mind maps use the basic idea of the flowchart layout (using lines to illustrate connections among discrete elements) and pushed it into a different direction. Because ideas don't have a start or a finish, the mind map can, in theory, begin anywhere and end anywhere.

Make Mind Maps Work For You

Mind-mapping programs are only going to be as good as the people using them. Because many people aren't used to the way mind mapping works, here are some hints to help you open up your synapses and make the most of any mind mapper.

1. Get your sea legs first. Mind mappers aren't quite like word processors, presentation programs, or databases. They retain a few features from each of those applications, but they're ultimately not like anything else out there. For that reason, the more direct experience you have with an idea-mapping program in any context, the better. If you're going to use a mind-mapping program to organize some major work effort at some point, try using it first to sort out ideas for a personal project. That way you can see how the program's workflow applies to your own way of thinking and then put that to use for more serious work later.

2. Train yourself to brainstorm. When we write down sets of ideas, most of us tend to force ourselves to precategorize everything. With a mind mapper, you can come up with the ideas in any order, without even having to decide categories for them first. The more you do this for *any* subject, the better you get at it. Don't worry about throwing out too many ideas or whether they're absurd; you can always pare them down later.

3. Use questions as well as statements to feed your map. Most people start creating a map by tossing out static, closed-ended statements, such as, "This needs to be done." Try using questions as well as statements to create parts of the map. A question such as, "Do we really need to do this particular part of the project?" could spawn a whole subsection of the map in which many unquestioned assumptions about what you're working on get put to the test. This, in turn, means more raw materials to put into the map.