



Mindmapping as a Project Management Tool

by Tari Akpodiete

Part art, part science, and a challenge under the best of circumstances, successful project management is an essential element of business today.

Some employees go willingly to the mission, while others find themselves put forward to answer the call. Creativity, patience and organizational ability are all important skills, but detailed documentation is one of the keys to success, and the tools one chooses to can make all the difference in the quest for the holy grail of on-time and on-budget project completion.

Microsoft Project, along with Word, Excel, Outlook and PowerPoint are favorite tools and common choices, but there is software for a practice known as 'mind mapping' which will allow a project manager and her team to more easily collaborate, brainstorm and problem-solve.

Mind mapping - which is also sometimes referred to as visual mapping or idea mapping - allows for the gathering, organization and presentation of a great deal of information, and can be used to visualize, structure, classify and analyze complex ideas and concepts. This functional approach makes it far more powerful at a meeting than simply taking notes.

Because mind maps are visually orientated and allow for the gathering, management and sharing of a lot of information, some are ideally suited as a project management tool. A project manager can use a mind map to assign priorities, and determine which specific resources are needed for both individual task, and the overall project. Ideas can be assigned a task status, and the percentage completed can also be displayed. Relationships between actions can be established which makes managing resources much easier.

A select few mind mapping software allows for brainstorming, problem-solving, scheduling, processing, time management, task management, agenda setting, event planning and the creation of effective presentations. This means that team members can get a lot accomplished in a single meeting. For example, in a very short time, perhaps over a working lunch, they can brainstorm, work out a preliminary estimate, assign resources and generate a draft schedule.

Ideas can be captured and presented visually. Branches and sub-branches can be added to the mind map to represent a variety of ideas or tasks, and notes and files can be added. Some specialized Mind mapping software are specifically optimized for the presentation of a hierarchical Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) and provide instantaneously present several views, including the mind map itself, as well as a top-down view, and a left/right view. Icons and images are easily imported to illustrate concepts, clarify thinking and boost information retention.

The top software can transform a mind map into traditional project plan by using a built-in Gantt view. This familiar project planning standard is empowering because it makes it possible to use the mind map for an entire project from start to finish with great efficiency. All of the following (and more) can be managed: dependencies, constraints, completion values, duration, lead/lag times, resources, priorities, critical paths, and milestones. And of course, one can export the file to Microsoft Project, should the need to do so arise.

A project manager can easily export the mind map to Outlook for additional task management. Existing task lists can also be imported from Outlook. And of course, the ability to synchronize versions of the same task list in the software and in Outlook is key to eliminating redundancies. Besides Outlook and Project, files can also be exported to Word and PowerPoint. Unfortunately, there are only a few software packages on the market that share these powerful characteristics.



COMMUNICATOR



Project Management Institute - Tampa Bay Chapter, Inc. - Chartered in 1992

Many project managers prefer mind mapping software that is multi-functional in its exporting. For example, simply using a few mouse clicks, they can also quickly build and publish a visually pleasing project website without having to be coders. This feature allows team members, senior management and clients to access a site which the project manager can update immediately just by changing information on the mind map and republishing it to the web, or on the project intranet.

Here is an example of one of the top products:

http://www.matchware.com/en/products/openmind/OpenMind2_BE/Project_management.htm

Chuck Frey, a renowned expert on mind mapping software, advocates using mind maps to streamline project management workloads. He suggests:

- creating an idea file to store ideas related to projects
- using a mind map to list project objectives
- using a mind map to define milestones, and track the progress of key elements
- creating a list of questions about project scope, things to ask others and any other miscellaneous questions which might arise
- creating a list of the information needed, research to be done, resources needed, people to be contacted and other information requirements
- linking to, and attaching, project resources such as web sites, documents and reports since that will save time looking for them
- defining and summarizing team roles and responsibilities
- tracking experts and sources which will need to be contacted
- creating notes to store additional information, but using a view so that it can be hidden from sight until needed, and then easily recalled

Besides being very useful for initial project planning, and functioning as an on-going visual 'executive summary', mind mapping is an excellent for status reporting and task tracking. Other useful techniques and strategies include breaking up complex projects into smaller linked maps, managing map content with filters, simplifying task management with the built-in tools, and utilizing templates to save time.

All in all, mind mapping is a powerful brainstorming, visualization and facilitation tool for project managers and the process can save an organization time and money in its project planning and management process.



COMMUNICATOR



Project Management Institute - Tampa Bay Chapter, Inc. - Chartered in 1992

MINDMAPPING RESOURCES

Blogs and Sites

The Mind Mapping Software Weblog

<http://mindmapping.typepad.com/>

Innovation Tools

<http://www.innovationtools.com>

Reference Material

E-books on Mind Mapping Software

<http://www.mindmap-ebook.com/>

Recommended Software

OpenMind 2 Business Edition

http://www.matchware.com/en/products/openmind/OpenMind2_BE/

OpenMind 2 Business Edition (project management features)

http://www.matchware.com/en/products/openmind/OpenMind2_BE/Project_management.htm

Review of OpenMind 2 Business Edition

http://www.innovationtools.com/Search/recommended_details.asp?a=263