

Have you ever thought about how your brain manages to evaluate different ideas and make decisions based on the analysis? Do you find any common thread between these seemingly different processes?

You may say there is. Breaking down and absorbing complex information in smaller bits leads to clarity in thinking, and makes things easier to remember. There is a common thread that runs through this process of exploring ideas, putting these in black and white and making decisions based on these thoughts.

It may interest you to see how your thoughts move in all directions when you are thinking over some business strategy that requires you to consider its multiple aspects. Wouldn't it be good if, instead of just letting your ideas move aimlessly from one thought to another in your mind, you could actually view these thoughts in their entirety, consider the different dimensions of your ideas and could make a decision without losing out on any of these threads.

With a technique called mind mapping, you can do this, and a lot more. Mentioned here are a few pointers that will guide you in using this technique and enable you to increase your decision-making ability to enhance productivity, with minimal efforts.

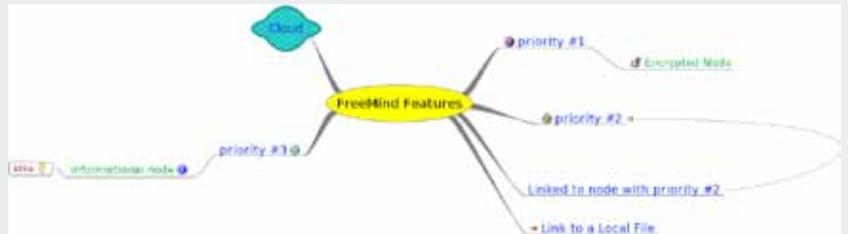
A picture is better than a thousand words

Let's look at the example of how ideas move in our minds and try and take them from a level where they are merely thoughts to a level where these ideas evolve to form a structure and become strategies—ready for implementation. Ideas keep getting better as they are refined by more people; they evolve as they are viewed from more perspectives, and they start

Not just paper-and-pen

Let's explore the FreeMind tool that was used to create the mind maps seen in this article. FreeMind is a free and open source tool that has a lot of options to make visually pleasing mind maps, while also being easy to use. It gives the user great control over the layout, styles, formatting, colours, etc, to suit everyone's taste.

A mind map created with some nodes that exhibit a few features is shown below. Priority icons, like 1, 2, etc, can be assigned to nodes. Some nodes can be linked to each other. Some nodes or even the entire map can be encrypted*, allowing access only to people who have the password shared by the creator. Some nodes can also be hidden from view.



[*Encryption is the process of converting information given in plain text into an unreadable format, which can be decoded by a person possessing a special key/ password to convert the coded text into plain text again.]

Mind maps created using FreeMind can be easily pasted into documents, spreadsheets, e-mails, PDFs, etc. FreeMind can also store the revision history of maps and can show all the revised versions and also the number of times the revisions and modifications have been made. The features described here just scratch the surface of what is possible with FreeMind. There is a lot of good documentation or user level instructions bundled with the program. A lot of information is available online as well. In fact, the accompanying FreeMind documentation is laid out as a mind map, with the topic nodes being chapters and sub-topics being sub-chapters and the actual Help text. This goes on to show how flexible and engaging mind maps can actually be!

For further information refer to:

Mind Maps:

https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Mind_map

FreeMind:

<http://freemind.sourceforge.net>

taking shape as more details emerge.

So how does one go about jotting down ideas and refining them? The good old paper-and-pen way can get messy if one doesn't follow a procedure. Procedure? Doesn't that make jotting down ideas seem boring and demotivating? Not really. Just like how managing a project, its schedules, deadlines, resources, etc, can be nicely defined by a process, jotting down ideas can be made into a constructive process.

Mind mapping is a process that is used to organise and visualise thoughts. It's a simple mechanism to jot down ideas, see the bigger picture, consider the various

factors that influence the subject, connect disjointed thoughts, etc. In simple words, the process allows you to think deeper as well as take a broader look and it helps in visualising your ideas, graphically.

Drawing mind maps, made easy

Let's delve deeper into the subject and create a mind map. The example used here is of an author preparing to write an article on mind maps, much like the current article you are reading. A similar process can be applied for any of your business tasks that involve organising information, making decisions or any

other task that requires multi-pronged thought processes.

To write an article on mind maps, the following points or thoughts may crop up: 'What are mind maps?', 'What is the target audience?', 'What should the message be?', 'How can some tool be used to help the process?', 'Why is knowing the subject important for business professionals?', 'What will they gain after knowing about the mind maps?', 'Which are the tools available for drawing up mind maps?', 'What capabilities exist in various tools?', 'What is the deadline for publication of the article?', and so on.

Now, these questions are a sequence of several ideas, which are not necessarily categorised or organised into a structure. So, to structure these thoughts or points, we can start by dividing the above thoughts under two categories:

- A general writing category
- A specific category for the current article

To represent all the above questions and some others, here is a mind map created using the FreeMind tool (refer Figure 1).

If you are thinking through a business problem or strategy, using a technique like mind maps can help you in performing this task, methodically.

A map starts out from the root node, or the centre of the diagram. In this case, it's the 'Mind Map Article' ellipse. Various nodes branch out from the root node, and each node can have a sub-node and siblings. It is much easier to get a grasp of the initial thoughts once they are represented in a diagrammatical way, rather than in text form, as in the paragraph above.

It also allows us to prioritise items and identify key tasks and their sub-tasks. Icons can be attached to nodes, like the '?', to represent an unknown item or unanswered query, and a caution icon that denotes the 'Deadline for Publishing' node in Figure 1. These icons help draw attention and segregate various aspects of the

diagram into different themes.

The main topic nodes can flow in all the directions around the root node, and then each topic node can branch out into sub-topic nodes around the topic nodes. In mind map diagrams, text still plays an important role, but it's much easier to connect various topics and sub-topics this way. These diagrams are a lot easier on the eye and also to comprehend and refer to at any later point, compared to going through unorganised textual notes.

By adding colour and mnemonics, like icons, the text can be made to come alive and speak more than the words depicted. The mind maps' structure starts forming associations in our minds and also aids in capturing more information in a short space of time. This makes mind maps much denser than just words and at the same time more informative and engaging.

The benefits of mapping the mind

It is often said that no idea is too silly and it is a good practice to jot down everything that comes to your mind if you are thinking through a business problem or strategy. Using a technique like mind maps can help you in performing this task, methodically. Let's look at the scenarios in which using mind maps can be of immense use.

To take better 'note' of your thoughts

Taking notes is one of the primary activities we indulge in. Be it at meetings, seminars or conferences. Taking notes by drawing mind maps allows you to segregate various themes and write short phrases that will help you reconstruct all the



Figure 1: A mind map created using the FreeMind tool

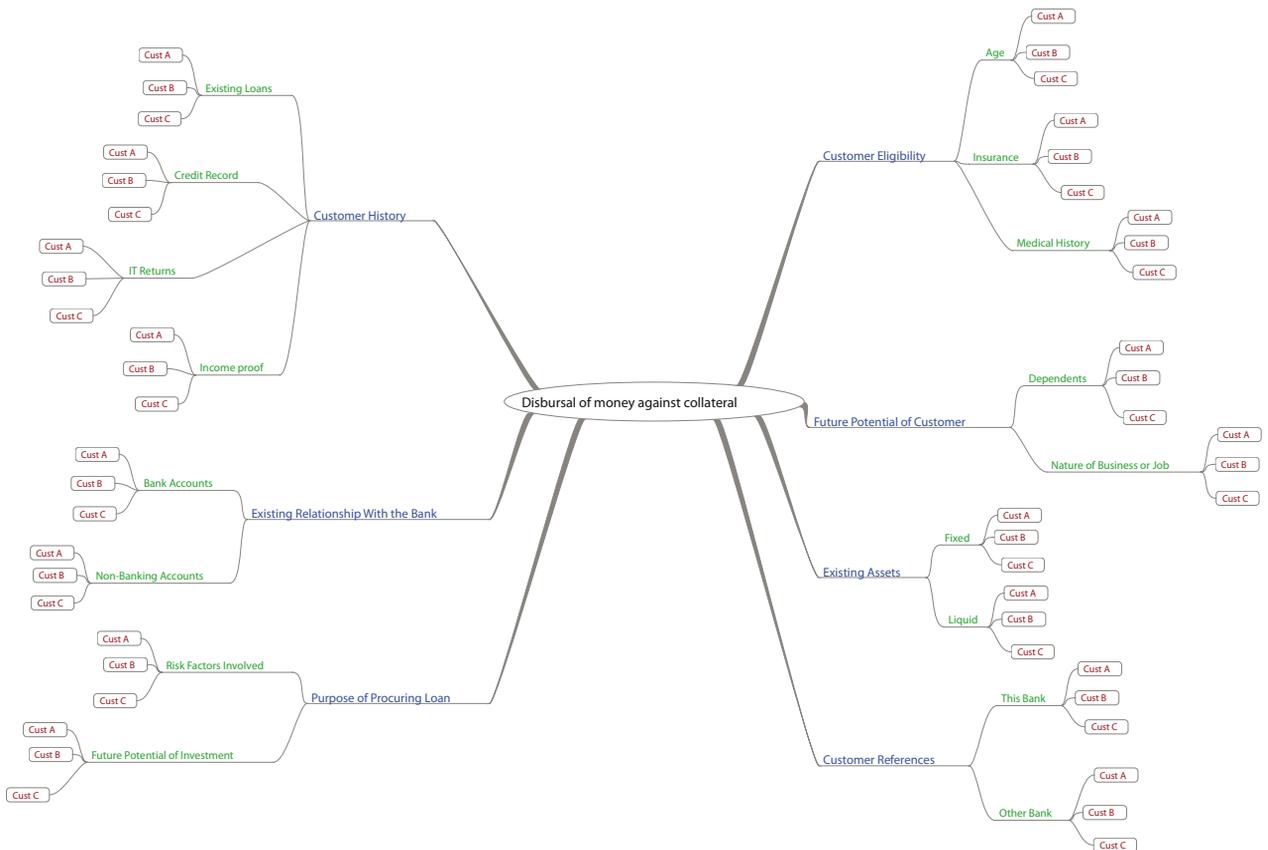


Figure 2: The mind map depicts all that someone in charge of a bank's loan department will need to consider before zeroing in on the prospective customers to whom a loan should be disbursed

important details later by a quick glance at the mind map, without having to remember every detail.

If you conduct brainstorming sessions in your organisation, during which various people build on each others' ideas, mind maps can be very useful to intuitively and quickly capture all the points discussed during the session, and categorise these thoughts as they come up. It becomes much easier to process all the data that has been created in this collaborative, sequential manner, at any later stage.

The visual approach helps in making informed decisions.

A real life example

Another advantage of mind mapping is the access to all relevant data in a concise form to make informed decisions. For example, consider

By mapping your mind, you can view your thoughts in their entirety, consider the different dimensions of your ideas and make a decision without losing on any of these threads.

that you are in charge of the loan department in a bank and have limited funds at your disposal to disburse as loans to prospective customers. You may have any or all of the following as points for consideration: "Whom do I give preference to?"; "Which customer is eligible for a larger share of the amount?"; "Who among the customers can prove to be a risky

proposition?" and so on.

It can really help if you visualise this problem and then come to a decision. Let's try doing that with the help of a mind map (refer Figure 2).

Isn't it much better when the parameters that go into making a decision are enumerated so clearly? Now one just has to enter the data in a spreadsheet, do some number-crunching, and be confident that all the parameters have been taken into consideration. Of course, the real parameters that go into making such a decision would be very different and more involved than the simplistic ones used here, but you get the idea.

So, the next time you are thinking through a business problem, consider trying this visual approach of plotting your ideas on to a map and see the difference it brings to your decision making processes. ■