Mind the gap: The assumption built into mind mapping software

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Training for software can be something of a contradiction. If it is easy and intuitive to use, why do we need training? If it is complicated to use, why are we buying it?

Since the inception of mind mapping software, we have been making an assumption so big that nobody stops to question it. The assumption is that we all know how to read each other's maps. They must be obvious, because they are visual and graphic. You only need to point out that ideas are connected to each other. Look – here is a branch that says "marketing" and here are some that say "Facebook" and "Emily". What could be easier? Maps are so simple over the short range that they hardly need any more explanation when scaled up. A big map is just a small map, only bigger.

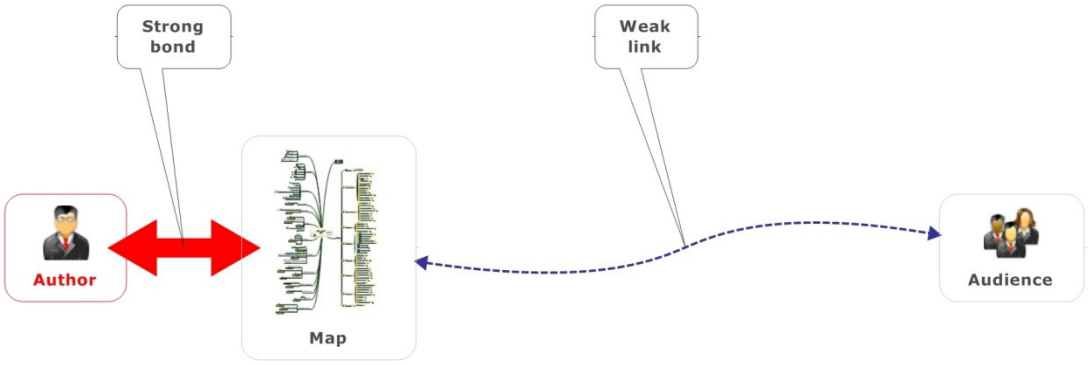
The consequences of this assumption are not immediately obvious, and to be fair, are not significant in all situations. Business use is affected the most. One consequence is that many of the maps used in business today have vague objectives, which makes it difficult to judge their success or failure. They just "are". If performance against objectives cannot be described, then there is no path to improvement. Another consequence is that people feel alienated by a visualisation that they don't understand when others do.

The solution is for mappers to learn how to design maps for others to consume.

Mind mapping software has similarities with presentation software. Most people can work out how to use it, can read the help file, or can get a book and teach themselves. They become qualified to take off, but not necessarily to land again. Using the same PowerPoint® knowledge and skills, one user can produce stimulating and engaging sessions, while another creates dreary and confusing monologues. Bullet points on slides become a convenient scapegoat for dreadful presentations, and technology wrongly takes the blame.

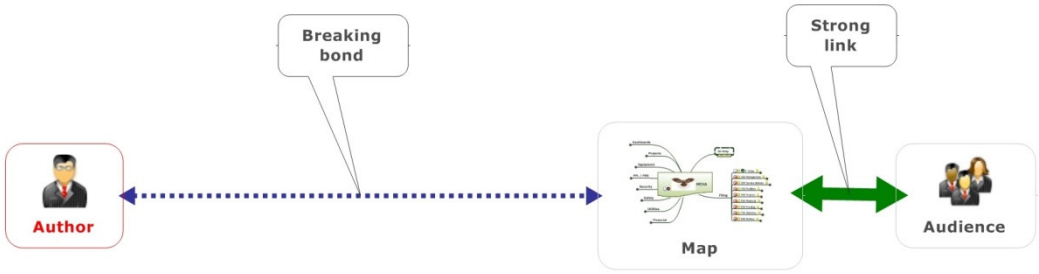
Ironically, mind mapping software is susceptible to mixed success in business for exactly the same reason that it works so well as a personal technique. The act of externalising

knowledge in maps creates a deep bond between the map and its author. When an author looks at their map, they cannot help but see more than is there, because the map is an *extension* of their thinking, not an independent replica of it. This is often difficult for authors to recognise and acknowledge.



The strong bond between authors and maps tends to exclude non-authors

This bond between maps and authors can act as an exclusion force field, affecting those who are outside this magical connection. The author is unconscious of the dual location of knowledge (both in his map and in his head), and sincerely believes that it is all in the map. Audiences are also unaware of the split, and blame the format, the technology or themselves for not "getting it" when others seem to. From the audience's point of view, their access to the map is *through* the author, who acts as its gatekeeper. As a result, puzzled looks or even outright negativity are not unknown to business users of mind mapping software who share complex maps. The usual diagnosis is that the audience need to be better informed about mind mapping, but this is not actually the problem. The solution is in the hands of the author, not the audience.



Designing maps to break the bond and move nearer to the audience

Moving beyond the assumption that maps are obvious to everyone is the next stage in the use of mind mapping software in business, and is where Harport Consulting offers expertise and training. Once you are comfortable with the features of your software, the next step is to understand the principles behind designing maps that are easy to look and and to

understand. Like most things in real life, simple designs require more effort than complex ones.

Harport Consulting's "Standard Map Design" course is based around a simple goal: to draw maps that can be interpreted by *anyone*, not just the author or authors. In many situations in the business world, this issue resolves itself by increasing the size of the author pool, to minimise exclusion and exclusivity. But this means that the value of visualisation is only recognised in local areas, where consensus has been readily adopted amongst like-minded people. Like PowerPoint, the skills behind effective presentations do not originate from (and cannot be credited to) the technology, but are based in more generic communication principles. Communicating with tree diagrams is a relatively new field, but can learn lessons from other areas.

Not everyone needs to share their maps, so making them accessible to others might seem pointless. But this overlooks an important issue – one day, you will be a stranger to your own maps. The design principles that make maps accessible also have a big impact on the usability of personal maps in terms of their useful lifetime and the speed with which you can visit a map, get oriented, take some action and leave again. If you don't try to decouple the bond that exists today between you and your map, while you still control it, then the information and knowledge that it contains is placed at risk from that bond naturally degrading over time.

But is this "problem" worth solving? Is it worth adding even more time, money and effort to the investment that you already made? After all, isn't mind mapping software supposed to "do" this out of the box?

We do not need to revisit the well-established benefits of visualisation for personal or group use. The rationale for taking action comes from the value of the intellectual property embedded in your maps. Using short-lifetime disposable maps for personal or small-group work is a sustainable technique that does not need "fixing". But if you are a manager, specialist or consultant, and your maps hold information and insights of strategic importance, then you should make provision for future-proofing them and designing them for access when you are not there. Or, if your company has invested in software without any guidelines for its users (beyond technical how-to resources), then even a simple set of design conventions would make a noticeable difference to the exchangeability of information and the perceived value of visualisation.

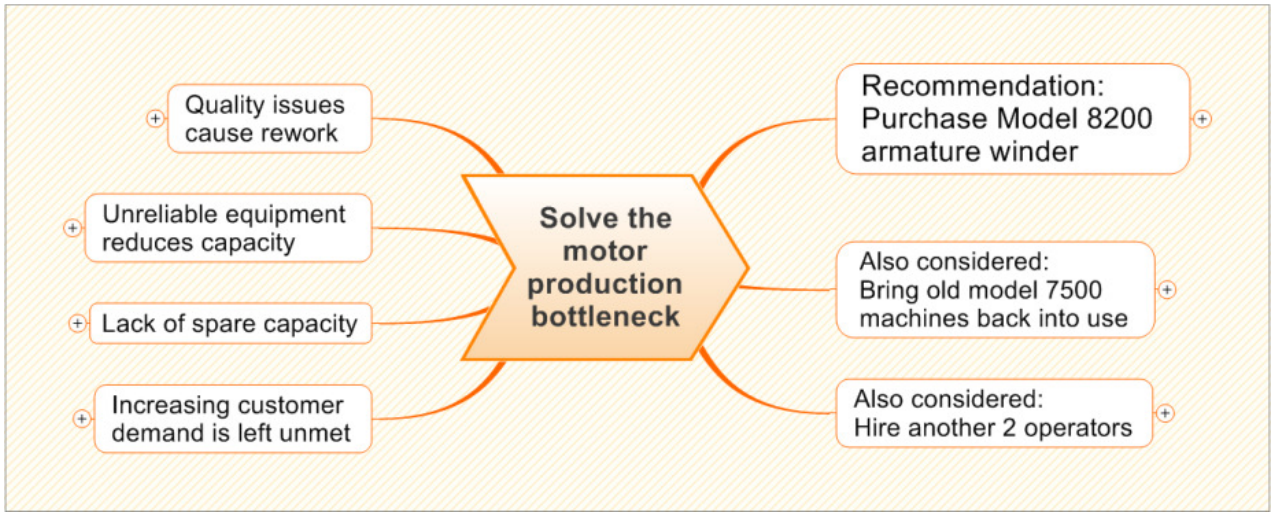
What does it really mean to understand someone else's map? In most other business documents (e.g. a report, a datasheet or a project plan), the purpose is implicit in its title and

layout, and sets up expectations. There are few conventions for maps. Many of them are just notes. A map should help us to quickly identify:

- Its purpose,
- How it is organised and how to find what I need,
- Its current status and the next stage, and
- What actions or response are expected from me.

Imagine that your company needs to make a decision on the best solution to a production bottleneck. Your VP has given you a five-minute slot in a busy meeting to present the findings of your research. This is a complex topic, with lots of history, technical details and the usual mix of personalities, opinion and fact. Typically, a software mind map could be used to gather all the background data, collect information on new machines and technologies, crunch some numbers, explore various scenarios and more. But in a five-minute slot, your best option would be to keep that map strictly to yourself, otherwise its size and scope will be a huge distraction from any message, and focus will disintegrate. How could you use mind mapping software effectively in this situation? Strategically, how do you avoid reinforcing the view that mind mapping software appears to make things more complex, not simpler?

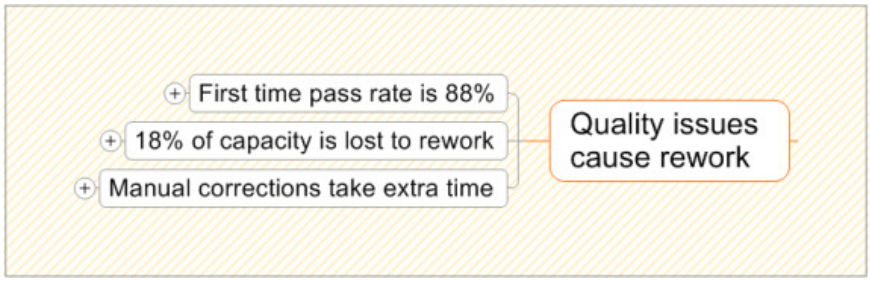
Here is the simple map that you present, as shown below:



Small maps are the “big picture”, not big maps

You explain this small map in just a few words: “This map summarises our investigation into the bottleneck in motor production. Time flows from left to right. The centre of the map is *now*, the point at which we decide to change things. On the left we have the current situation up to the present time. On the right we explore future situations. Our recommendation is to purchase a model 8200 armature winder.”

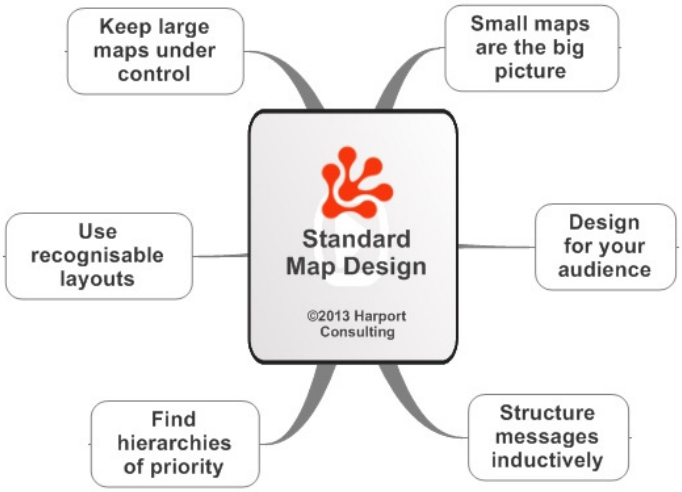
The layout of this map is very different from the one that you began the project with. You might find that during the presentation, you don't need to expand it beyond seven branches, if discussions stay at a high level. But if you need to back up your assertions or conclusions with more detail, you can easily drill down into the individual areas that are summarised by each branch:



The position of the information in the map reinforces its position in time and its role in the flow of causes and effects. Your audience can easily see what information and assumptions you are working to, and how they all fit together. If you need the facts and figures behind the 88% pass rate, they are below that branch in the map, and are only ever revealed in the context of that summary.

The map itself might be huge, and only you and a couple of colleagues really know what is in there. Nobody ever sees the whole map unfolded all at once. But the reduction to a handful of branches means that it is accessible to many more people, and provides a step by step framework for understanding the contents.

The skill lies in getting from an initial brainstorm to an expansible structure that can be made compact enough to share. This map is one of a small set of designs that support specific business scenarios, covered by the course agenda.



The agenda is independent of any particular software product, and is designed for users who already have some level of proficiency with their software. It includes:

- Recognising the opportunities and limitations of software tools: distribution and access, folding and the limitations of a restricted view
- Applying tree-shaped analysis to a range of situations: finding and modelling meaningful hierarchies
- Designing and using small maps: creating maps that still work when folded up
- Using inductive structures to prioritise messages: visualising “elevator pitches”
- The influence of patterning on the behaviour of large maps: the critical influence of the central area of a map
- Using the canvas layout to visualise the purpose of the map
- Using a library of easily understood layouts to speed up orientation

A training agenda for achieving this must be interactive, rather than a one-size-fits-all package. Different business cultures and different objectives in using visualisation make some aspects more important than others. It is also much more meaningful in the context of real work, rather than an idealised scenario where problems are designed to match solutions.

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