

CREATIVITY SKILL 2: MIND MAPPING

After reviewing your mental models and perhaps updating them, you may think your models are sound and consistently reflect reality. Does this mean you are still stuck with the same problem—a lack of new investment ideas? No, because new combinations of old ideas can be a viable path to a new investment idea and even breakthrough thinking. Creativity of this kind is incremental, or evolutionary, rather than radical.

One time-tested tool for such breakthroughs is mind mapping. Mind maps are an idea pioneered by Tony Buzan in his best-selling book *The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential*. Although Buzan's book is the definitive source for this creative technology, mind mapping can be described fairly simply. In essence, a mind map is a way to see at a glance the interconnections and relatedness of information that pertains to a single idea.

Advocates of mind mapping believe that one of the reasons for the success of this technology is that information in our minds is not naturally structured hierarchically but, rather, is organized in a tree-like fashion. A single idea serves as the trunk of the tree and related ideas branch off from the trunk, and still more detailed, related information branches off from these branches.

What follows are some sample steps for creating a mind map. You can also see the sample mind map later in this chapter that represents the major ideas of the best-selling book *How to Think like Leonardo da Vinci* at a glance, in one diagram.

Time needed: An investment of about 30–45 minutes

Materials needed: A way to record your thoughts

STEPS:

1. Preparation
2. Choosing the trunk
3. Branches
4. Branches of branches
5. Looking for meaning

1. PREPARATION

Start with a clean piece of paper that is large enough to capture your ideas before creating a mind map. Many who use mind maps routinely also recommend that if you are using a rectangular piece of paper, you should turn the paper so that it is longer horizontally than vertically. Doing so can help activate the more creative aspects of consciousness that prefer holistic, interconnected analysis rather than linear analysis.

2. CHOOSING THE TRUNK

Next, choose a central idea for which you would like an incremental creative insight. This is the trunk of your mind map. For example, if you are a research analyst covering wearable technologies, you may want a better understanding of whether such technologies are “the next big thing.” If so, this idea—the next big thing—would be placed at the center of your mind map.

Traditionally in mind mapping, the more visual you make your mind map, the better. Again, this is because creativity is best unleashed when you engage your senses and make your ideas more concrete and less abstract. So, is there an image of your trunk that is emblematic of its essence? Are there colors that are symbolic of the idea? For example, is your idea “golden” or are there “dark storm clouds on the horizon”? You get the idea. Be visual, be colorful; avoid straight lines if you can.

If you feel bold about the future of wearables, for example, you might represent your trunk as a train locomotive. Or if you think the world is uncertain, you might make your emblem for this idea a mini-drawing of choppy seas. Don't worry if you can't draw. You are the only one viewing your mind map, and remember that the reward may be new investment ideas or actionable insights.

If you find that the prospect of drawing stifles your flow, then look for an image of your emblem to copy and paste in the center of your mind map. If you anticipate a bear market, you could use an image of a bear to represent that idea. Put the image somewhere on your piece of paper, making sure to leave room for other emblems and ideas.

3. BRANCHES

Once you have your mind map's trunk, you can start to add branches to it. Here, you can think about the ideas that are tangent to your central idea. Keeping with the wearables example, you might include such branches as fashion, functionality, and price. Place these branches around the central idea/trunk. Again, pictures can help activate your creativity. So, for fashion you might have an image of a futuristic wearable device. For price, you might choose to use an image of a euro or some other currency (maybe even gold).

Once you have placed these branches on your paper, draw arrows from the branches back to the trunk. Try to label each branch with a single word—fashion, functionality, price—so that they cue your consciousness when thinking about these tangential ideas.

4. BRANCHES OF BRANCHES

Now that you have branches on your trunk, you need to identify the ideas and thoughts that branch off your main branches. In the wearables example, branching off price might be manufacturing and distribution. From the fashion branch, you might have life cycle or viral. Place these smaller branches around the main branches. Again, be as visual as possible.

Depending on how far you would like to pursue a new insight about your idea, you could have many branches from branches from branches. The main factor driving your choice should be answering *yes* to the following question: Is the way I think about this idea largely described in image? If so, you can stop.

5. LOOKING FOR MEANING

Incremental creativity, the kind you are striving for with a mind map, works because the mind likes to associate disparate pieces of information to seek meaning in these disparate ideas. So, look at your mind map and begin to soak up the different parts of it. Do interconnections naturally occur? Compare lesser branches on one branch with lesser branches on another branch; is there an important connection that you might have missed? In the wearables example, you might realize that the need for wearables to be fashionable each year increases their cost, which unites previously separate branches: fashion and price; life cycle and manufacturing.

If there are no connections between your various ideas and models, imagine what would join them together. What are the implications of a lack of connections? What was the state of your mental map six months ago? Twelve months ago? Can you imagine it being different in six months? Twelve months? What would cause this change?

If you find new connections, draw lines linking these ideas together on the paper. Next, assign a new name or label to the link. An example would be linking together a greater global interest in electronic gadgets and a greater use of electricity per capita globally with a line labeled “global power companies will benefit.” Here, you formalize a connection between the two disparate ideas with a new creative realization—global power companies will benefit—that links the two together.

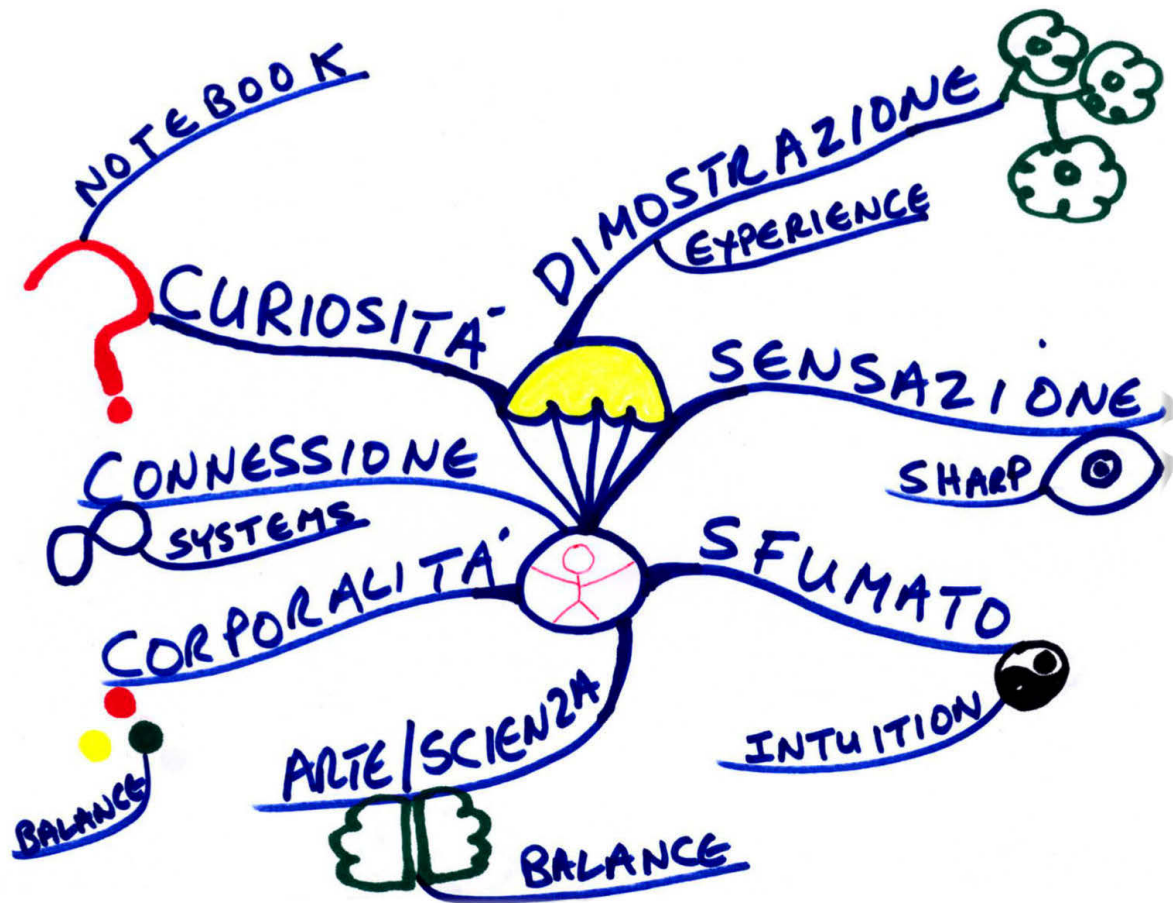
Do you have an emotional reaction to any part of the mind map? That is, in looking at one part of it, are you excited? Or alternatively, are you anxious? If so, spend some time contemplating what the source of these emotions might be. Could it be that you bought into the wearables “story” because of an artfully delivered sell-side presentation rather than a careful analysis? Has the fashion element always bothered you?

If executing a mind map does not result in a new insight or investment idea, *relax*. As with most endeavors, it can take time to become proficient at mind mapping. In particular, if you are used to using only the hard, analytical functions of your mind, it may take a while to believe that drawing pictures will improve your investment results. But research has demonstrated that mind maps improve people’s creativity,^{1,2} and I think you will agree that doing what no one else is doing—or seeing something in a way that no one else is seeing it—can be a source of alpha generation. Maybe, just maybe, the space you are looking at is so well trodden that a radical creative breakthrough is called for.

¹R. Al-Jarf, “Enhancing Freshman Students’ Writing Skills with a Mind Mapping Software,” paper presented at the 5th International Scientific Conference, eLearning and Software for Education, Bucharest (April 2009).

²S. Margulies, *Mapping Inner Space: Learning and Teaching Mind Mapping*, 2nd ed. (Tucson, AZ: Zephyr Press, 1991).

MIND MAP FROM *HOW TO THINK LIKE LEONARDO DA VINCI*



Source: Courtesy of Michael J. Gelb (<http://michaelgelb.com>).