USING VISUAL COLLABORATION TO CREATE BUSINESS CONTEXT

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People have become accustomed to streams when it comes to collaboration. Streams of e-mail. Streams of social media posts, comments, likes and favorites. Most streams, however, are not only fleeting, but context free. Reading a single post doesn't connect people to bigger news stories, the lives of those involved or related details about a project or product. Hashtags, metadata and indexing help people search the streams, but the results don't ultimately add up to a context. And in collaboration context is everything.

Visual collaboration offers an alternative, and a complement, to other forms of collaboration. Through deep object relationships, visual collaboration creates context for ideas or concepts within a virtual space. Interactions then guides people from one idea, from one task, or activity to others conceptually related, or

perhaps to seemingly disparate ones that offer new insight.

Visual Collaboration is Different

Visual collaboration takes place with visceral immediacy. An image represents a domain of knowledge, a project or function in its entirety. The image can be simple or it can be complex. In most cases, it is both, with the complexity controlled by the end user, and various views offered by various authors to emphasize certain aspects of the representation. And although constructs exist, they are not immutable, but plastic, adaptive, multi-dimensional. Rather than being one person's view, or worse, very simple representations bubbling up from a number of hidden personal views, visual collaboration forces reconciliation and negotiation toward a consensus reality. It isn't enough that something is put in, it needs to fit in. But interestingly, because visual collaboration captures multiple dimensions, individual views can be maintained alongside consensus views.

Most collaboration repositories fail because they are flat. When looking at one document, people have a hard time seeing how that document relates to other documents. The same goes for people and

appointments. Most mail directories fail to tell people what those listed are working on, who they work with or what they are doing next. Metadata, related content and other forms of streams and feeds designed to enhance traditional collaboration approaches do more to fragment context than to create it. Only when everything related to a topic can be visualized in a single virtual space, can context truly exist.

The World is Not Flat

Thomas Friedman informed his readers in 2005 that *The World is Flat*. For many reasons that assertion does not live up to its hype. For one, Friedman's view on workflow software as a collaboration approach doesn't turn out to be flat at all. Although people can connect via technology with ever increasing speed and acuity, the quality of those connections leaves much to be desired. Lowest common denominator standards don't provide the richest experiences. They do create flatness, along the lines that "my soda is flat" — e.g., lifeless, low fidelity interactions that look more like transactions than collaboration.

Flat worlds also invoke two-dimensions where people must walk over each other to get anyplace. The world as described by classic physics fills three dimensions plus space-time, but computers, like the human brain, need not be limited by the constraints of physics. In virtual constructs, multiple dimensions co-exist.

Although visual collaboration doesn't perceptually reach into other dimensions, it does so logically. TheBrain, for instance, employs a number of tools, like parent-child relationships, jump-relationships and tags that represent the multidimensionality of an idea.
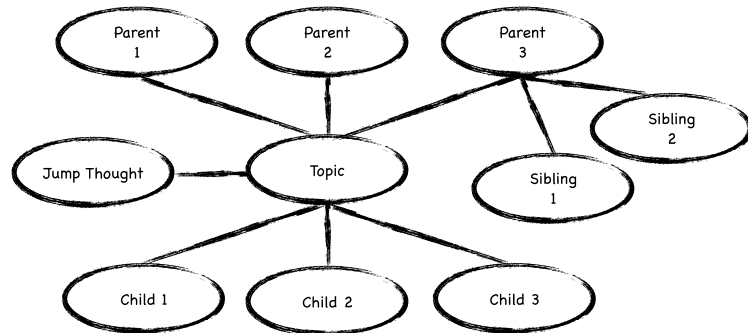

Figure 1. Relationship Types

Parent-child links, for instance, suggest that an idea is directly related as a subordinate to another idea. For instance, a topic called "Strategy" would include all ideas and projects below it. This relationship defines a hierarchy. But unlike most systems of classification, TheBrain permits multiple parents. A marketing project may be linked to a parent titled, "Sales" as well. Links themselves can also have values, such as "investment" and "project leader" to further clarify the relationships.

Thoughts can also have "jump" or horizontal relationships. A project, for instance, might include project members as jump thoughts, or a meeting might include information related to the agenda as jump thoughts.

The intent here is not to provide a tutorial for TheBrain, but to demonstrate how the richness of its representation model can

create better collaboration spaces than those based simply on lists of items sorted by metadata.

Although a typical project might require lists of project members, as well as associated meetings, research, etc., there is no way, short of multiple queries that end up in a spreadsheet or a portal, to get all of the related information into one place—and a portal with multiple windows into a repository is more likely to confuse someone about its intent, than

allows people to interactively, collectively and incrementally build up a representation of the world that works for them.

Collaboration Reimagined

Collaboration comes in essentially four forms: e-mail, social networking, real-time meetings and repositories. I won't repeat arguments made many times about e-mail's inadequacy to drive meaningful collaborative experiences, I will just stipulate to it. With social
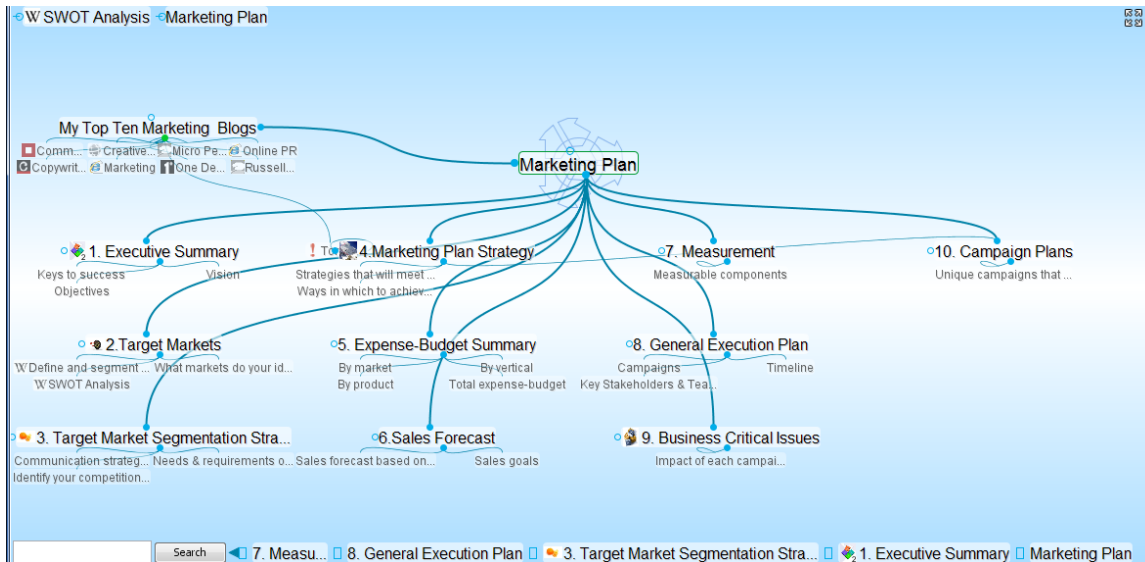

Figure 2: A marketing plan represented in TheBrain

to clarify how information objects are related to one another.

The world is not flat. It is lumpy, unwieldy and messy, but that does not mean that useful representations of the world cannot be achieved. For collaborative context to provide value, the representation must purposefully include the messiness without leading to obfuscation. TheBrain does just this. It

networking, the wild openness and transparency of such systems are creating new ways for groups to engage; unfortunately, they offer no theory of organization that creates a meaningful context. And although real-time meetings can arrive at a context, unless people document, share and link everything from a meeting and wrap-it up in to a tight little digital ball, the context evaporates when the meeting concludes. And repositories,

though designed to capture everything about a project, function or product, do so in a way that make rooting out a context impossible.

Visual collaboration complements, and in some cases, may replace existing tools.

E-mail messages exist in the private inboxes of those within a particular conversation. Only those people within the conversations may see a message. A message about a project has no relationship to the project, and there is no guarantee that the information in the message is associated with the project. With TheBrain, simply drag and drop a file into the appropriate place in the visual collaboration structure, and not only does it become visible to the entire team, it becomes part of the active repository of thoughts associated with the project.

The ability to place messages, files, contacts and other information into a collaborative information space creates a more cohesive and holistic representation of the project's activities, communications, arguments, knowledge—whatever, than does putting the same information into even the best structured traditional repository. Not only are the information objects now linked, visual collaboration increases awareness of what exists by making it more visible.

Creating A Visual Framework for Collaboration

Visual frameworks begin with a thought. They may not eventually evolve around that thought, but a single thought starts

everything because that thought is connected to at least one other thought, and perhaps many more. The thought may be an idea, a meeting, a plan, almost anything that crosses your mind.

Although it isn't hard to change a visual collaboration space and reconnect thoughts, it is very useful to think about the intent of a visual space, before creating one.

Determine the spaces' scope:

- Universal space (for everything about an organization)
- A digital asset library for all digital materials used inside or outside of the organization
- A project space
- A function space (for instance public relations related work and materials only)

The central idea should initially hold text that states its purpose.

For common items, it is very important to start with what is known and put that into the space prior to inviting others to join. If the project is large, concentrate on critical, near-term items first. If people find themselves invited to a blank space, they may not find immediate value and fail to engage.

Figure 3. Project representation in TheBrain

Common items to include in a project space upon creation include:

- Team members
- Milestones
- Resources
- Objectives

And since many organizations use web-based tools or interfaces, many of these items can be dropped into the visual collaboration space as links that remain tied to the system of record.

It is then time to start engaging people. This starts by inviting them to the space, which makes them aware of its existence. Set the expectation that everything gets done through the visual collaboration space.

The next level of engagement quickly becomes very specific to the project, its team, its terminology and its outcomes. Don't restrict people from creating links and adding information. As they build the visual space, it will become more and

more their go-to place for that team's work. Active teams self-correct errant entries and add richness well beyond the content stored in the space.

Visual collaboration spaces, like those created in TheBrain, routinely exist in private or public clouds that make them accessible to people 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and often on any device of their choosing. The ubiquity of access permits individuals to engage regardless if they are in a facility or not, even if they are "on the clock" or not.

If, as in many organizations, a plethora of collaboration tools co-exist, they are likely compete at the feature level. For any one of them to succeed, they must become the *de facto* space that people work through. If people's attentions fragment when faced with competing ways, for instance, to manage tasks, then they will select the one that works best for them, and neglect the others. Managers and teams must agree that the visual collaboration space is where they will conduct their work.

Nurturing Serendipity

Organizations that deploy collaboration strictly as a way to facilitate the rapid production and dissemination of information or the efficiency of communication, don't understand the emergent nature of true collaboration.

Context challenges people. Context has weight. Context isn't easily dismissed. Context forces people to confront relationships between ideas that might just complicate their lives or their worldviews. It is in that moment of tension that creative sparks begin to fly.

Collaboration begets serendipity. When someone opens a visual collaboration space for the first time, he or she has no idea what they will find, what they will do with what they find, or how what they contribute may inspire in the form of product development, process improvement or breakthrough innovation.

Although collaboration tools can clearly improve production-oriented processes like those found in a call center, their real value comes from managing chaotic information and providing a place for people to capture, test and discover new ideas.

Organizations who count how many nodes are created in a day miss the point. Although at the early stages of brainstorming quantity takes precedence over quality, online collaboration engagement may take time. It may take time for people to discover, to engage and to begin to play off one another. An idea

placed in the visual collaboration space may linger, waiting for someone with a complementary point-of-view to shore up weak aspects, or simply to become its champion. Unlike the repeated delivery of expectations against a plan in a production environment, collaboration and serendipity don't synchronize with the rhythm of the business, but rather act as a counterpoint, sometimes even an irritating hum.

In serendipitous collaboration, the network itself, or the value-web of human relationships, creates its own level of uncertainty and chaos. No one can predict who will engage, when they will engage or what they will bring to the collaboration. All value is backward looking. And as the network gains and loses members, the potential of the network also changes, adding to its dynamics.

Visual collaboration environments help organizations embrace serendipity, because the growth of the collaboration environment often reflects the serendipitous ideas and activities as they unfold.

(For more information on serendipity in business, see Welcome to The Serendipity Economy)

From Personal to Collaborative

There is a strong propensity among people who create visually organized representations of their personal knowledge to keep that knowledge private, to maintain control because it was so painstakingly crafted, achingly revised and personally fulfilling for the

individual who created it. Those types of visual representations are not the best place to begin a collaborative endeavor, regardless of how useful the knowledge. Those spaces are too precious in their own way, and any suggestion of modification by others will likely create more argument than collaboration.

Ideally, collaborative spaces begin with a bit of shared chaos, gaining structure as many individuals contribute. Through the collaborative act, meaning and value emerge. It is not unlike the individual creating his or her own representations, but the accountability and responsibility is shared, mitigating personal attachments.

The best visual collaboration spaces will start as shared spaces with strong champions who populate them quickly.

The Future of Collaboration

Collaboration will inevitably become more visual. Current approaches to collaboration often fail because people cannot find each other, discover content or figure out a mode of communication that matches their desired expression.

Visual collaboration environments make it very apparent where activity is taking place, but most importantly, they create a contextual setting for the work that occurs. People do not need to guess about how their outputs or outcomes affect other areas of the business, because they can see the direct link to that part of the business, drawn by them, or by the recipient. And unlike static workflows, the relationships built in visual collaboration

environments aren't rigid with structured reviews and expected forms, but are organic and evolutionary. The outcome may affect another part of the business, but what form that outcome takes may be a surprise to both parties, as the people collaborating co-create their products, processes or business models.

Those who adopt visual collaboration environments will be able to more nimbly, and quickly adapt to change, because they can reflect that change with an immediacy within these environments that just isn't possible in the flat world of traditional collaboration repositories.

The arrival of a new competitor isn't just a post on a stream, but a dynamic tying up of actions that create a visual story about what has happened, who is involved in reacting, and what assets need to be created, or have already been created, that can be brought to bear on the new business situation. That rapid creation of context is equally valuable when responding to natural disasters, product innovation or strategic shifts—to any event where dynamics rather than redundancy drives the outcome.

Organizations that want to effectively collaborate need to explore visual collaboration tools today, or risk being second movers when industry events occur, and second rate at maximizing the intelligence of their employees and partners.

Ten Benefits of Visual Collaboration

1. Creates a context for collaboration by linking work to all relevant ideas, activities or people.
2. Helps people discover information, ideas and activities related to the work they do.
3. Provides a dynamic environment where work can evolve, yet remain within a structure.
4. Manages alternative structures that emerge from metadata.
5. Allows people to work within a consensus structure while maintaining a personal view without compromising the value in either.
6. Links and documents provide deeper value when linked in context.
7. Facilitates rapid evolution in response to business changes.
8.   Scales from personal representations to representations of an entire organization or business.
9. Reflects the chaotic, emergent nature of the way people work.
10. Complements and enhances other collaboration investments by helping place content and communications in context.

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About the Author

Daniel W. Rasmus, the author of *Listening to the Future*, is a strategist and industry analyst who helps clients put their future in context. Rasmus uses scenarios to analyze trends in society, technology, economics, the environment, and politics in order to discover implications used to develop and refine products, services and experiences. His latest book, *Management by Design,* proposes an innovative new methodology for the design workplace experiences. Rasmus' thoughts about the future of work have appeared recently in *Chief Learning Officer Magazine*, *Talent Management* and *KMWorld*. Rasmus is an internationally recognized speaker. He has addressed audiences at CeBIT, KMWorld, The Front End of Innovation, The National Association of Workforce Boards, ProjectWorld, The CIO Association of Canada and Future Trends. He writes regularly for *Fast Company, iPhone Life* and *PopMatters*. Rasmus is the former Visiting Liberal Arts Fellow at Bellevue College in Bellevue, WA where he continues to teach strategy and social media.

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About the Sponsor

TheBrain Technologies helps people make sense of the wide range of information they need to organize and assimilate on a daily basis. TheBrain's patented visual interface lets you link any file or concept to anything else. Users can visualize and link their thinking and information on computer desktops, and mobile devices both as individuals creating personal knowledgebases or collaboratively to create a TeamBrain. TheBrain's visual connections grow to become a powerful knowledge network that enables more intelligent access and sharing of information

TheBrain has been downloaded by over a million people and is in use by over half the Fortune 100. TheBrain's Government and Academic customers include the Department of Defense, Navy Special Warfare, Joint Council on Thoracic Surgery Education, as well as many state organizations and leading universities worldwide.

Industry Analysis