

Agile not fragile

Is the pressure of information overload getting to you? Join the club. Here Clive Lewis, MD of Illumine Training, argues that mental agility is your best hope for survival.

It's like a tidal wave coming right at you. It's coming via text, email, reports, messages, policies and guidelines. It's coming at speed from every direction and you are supposed to know how to do more than stay afloat. In today's business world you are expected to be able to use all this information.

Of course some people realise that too much data is counterproductive. Take John Caudwell, the boss of UK mobile phone business Phones 4u, who announced at the end of last year that he was banning his employees from using email in the office. Brave but foolish. You can't hold back the incoming tide.

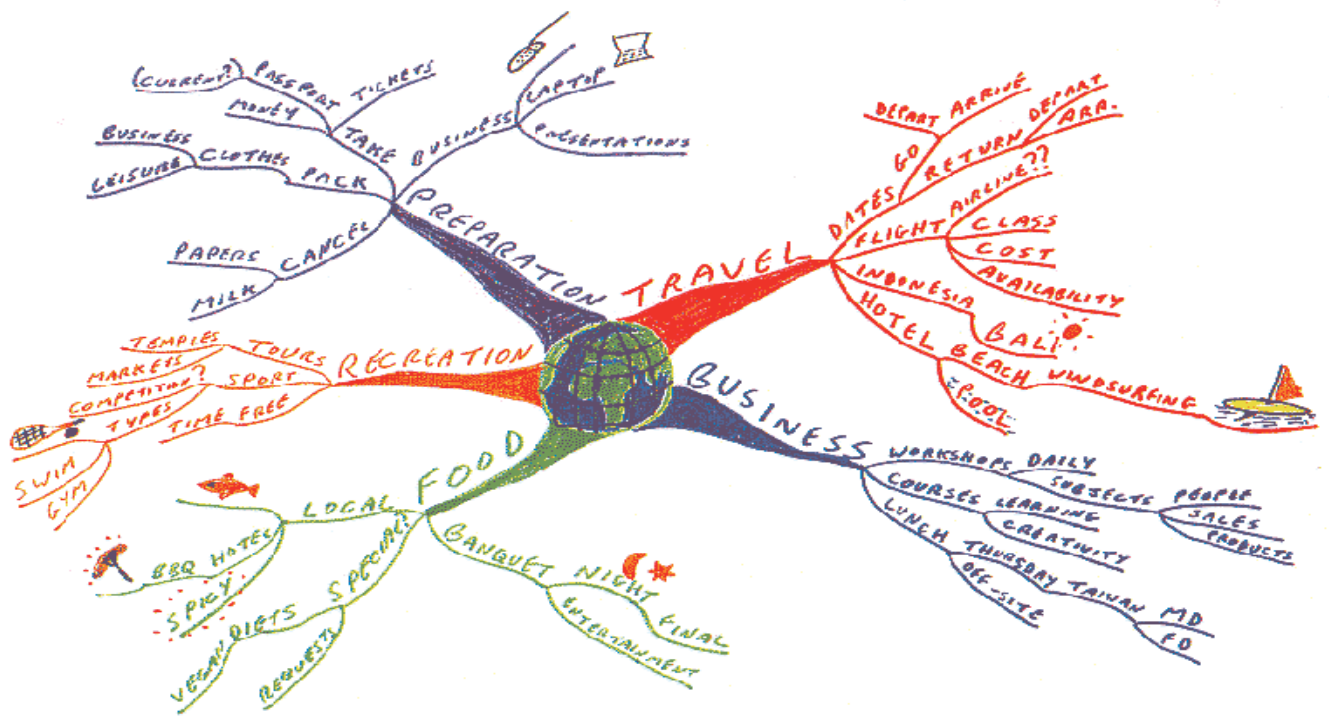
So what can you do? Is the solution to work harder and longer? Only, I suggest, if you want to have a breakdown. No, the creative solution is to find ways to work smarter and this means improving your mental agility. As for how you do this I suggest that there are three simple techniques which have the potential to transform your working life. And the good news is that there is nothing difficult about learning any of them.

1. The magic of Mind Mapping®.

You may well have heard about Mind Mapping. In essence it provides a visual representation of the way that we think. We don't think in lists or text - we think in images and themes, shapes and patterns, all interconnected.

To prove this let's take an example. If you think about your next summer holiday a number of associated thoughts will spring to mind ... where you want to go, how to travel, the people you will go with, the cost and so on. And as you think of each of these thoughts you will have hundreds more associated ideas.

Mind Mapping reflects this natural thinking process. It's a graphic technique which focuses on a central issue and allows you to generate all sorts of ideas which radiate around it. Take a look at this classic mind map, below, on how to organise a business trip. It depicts the main issue at the centre, includes the main themes branching out and includes a variety of other ideas that are associated with each of these themes.



So how does this help with overload? It helps because it makes it easier to learn, record and remember information. Compare it to note taking which is a laborious process and where almost nothing stands out on the page. No surprise that the brain goes to sleep. In contrast Mind Mapping saves labour because you only write down the key words, saves time because you only have to read what is relevant and is memorable because it is visually stimulating.

And you don't have to be a compulsive note taker to use Mind Mapping. Try using it when you are planning your next project, when you want to solve a problem or when you want to generate creative ideas. (Find out more on www.mind-mapping.co.uk.)

2. Treble your read speed

Who wouldn't want to benefit from speed-reading? Just consider for a moment that around 30-50% of all your time at work is spent reading and then imagine that you can double or treble your reading speed. In terms of dealing with overload this is a no brainer.

So how does it work?

Well let's start with the eyes. Do they move smoothly from left to right as you read across the page? No they don't. If you actually watch someone's eyes as they are reading you will notice a jerky movement as they progress from one word to the next. You may also notice that their eyes even skip backwards every now and again as they reassure themselves that they haven't missed anything or they check their understanding.

This is extremely unproductive and unnecessary. We learned to read one word at a time and never grew out of the habit. But our brain is capable of much more and by expanding our field of vision we can learn to take two or three words or even whole lines at a time. Don't believe me? Here's an experiment. Take a pen and run it underneath the words you are reading. It will help the speed of your reading as well as your comprehension because the eye is going where you want it to. Simple.

3. Stretching your memory muscle

The final way to bolster your mental agility is to stretch your memory so you retain more information. You will have great trouble in remembering things that you find dull so when you are learning you need to make the task stimulating and memorable.

One way to do this is to use the associative power of memory. Quite literally you can remember key names or pieces of information by putting them into an easy to remember chain. Let me briefly explain how you can remember up to ten random pieces of information using a number rhyme 'peg' system. To start with you give each number a rhyming key word e.g. gun (one), shoe (two), tree (three) and so on. Then each of the words you want to remember is linked to that 'peg'. So if, for example, the third term you wanted to remember is 'coaching' you might imagine a picture of a coach going along a tree lined road. And this makes it easy to remember.

This sounds amazingly simple but it works. In reality what you are doing is using both the linear and the visual qualities of your brain - and by linking them together you can improve your memory dramatically. Additionally, if you learn to take breaks when you are learning new information and build in short two minute reviews this will also make a staggering difference to what you absorb and are able to recall.

Now none of this is hard and most of it can be very creative. Your challenge is simply to learn these three techniques, which can be done in a day, and then to practise them in your own working life. I promise that if you do this then you will never feel as though you are drowning in information again. In fact with your newly developed mental agility you will be able to surf your way to success.

www.illumine.co.uk

Mind Mapping® is a registered trademark of the Buzan organisation.