

Visual thinking: An essential skill for 21st-century executives

An interview with Dave Gray, founder and chairman of XPLANE, the visual thinking company.



Q: Why is visual thinking an essential skill for 21st-century executives?

Dave Gray: It used to be that you could block competitors by outspending them. By investing in factories, trucks, ships, etc. you could keep competitors out of the market because they couldn't afford to compete for shelf space in the retail markets. But in a digital world the costs of making and distributing products is minimal, and the shelf space is unlimited. So in order to win you need to do more than block competitors – you need to innovate. That's where visual thinking comes in. Innovation requires creativity, imagination and design thinking, and visual thinking is a great tool for that kind of work.



Q: How does visual thinking enable people to make better, faster and more informed decisions?

Dave Gray: When people don't understand things, they're at a crossroads – they don't know which way to go. This means they put off decisions, which has the net effect of slowing down everything else. When people understand, they make decisions and act more rapidly. Since visual thinking is a tool to increase clarity and understanding, especially related to complex or potentially confusing information, it can help people make better, faster decisions, leading to better results and better business performance.

Visual thinking is a language, a literacy, that gives you one more tool for understanding the world, solving problems, and imagining new opportunities and possibilities

Q: Has there been a fundamental change in the nature of the business problems that need to be solved today? Why is this need for visual thinking just emerging now?

Dave Gray: Yes, as I said I think that the transition to a digital economy has leveled the playing field. Small, creative companies can now compete with global giants. Many of today's technology giants – Apple, Microsoft, Google, Oracle, to name a few – were started by small teams with little to no capital. Creativity counts more today than ever before. Today's business executive needs to be a creative, innovative thinker, and visual thinking can help.

Q: What kind of skills does visual thinking involve? Do you need to be able to draw to do it? Does everyone have this skill, or only certain types of people?

Dave Gray: There will always be a need for specialists and technicians who perform unique, specific functions. But for the generalist, like the general manager for example, visual thinking is increasingly a necessary skill. Like every skill, people will differ in their natural aptitude and ability. But like reading, writing and arithmetic, it's a skill that everyone can learn. If you can learn to read and write, you can learn visual thinking.

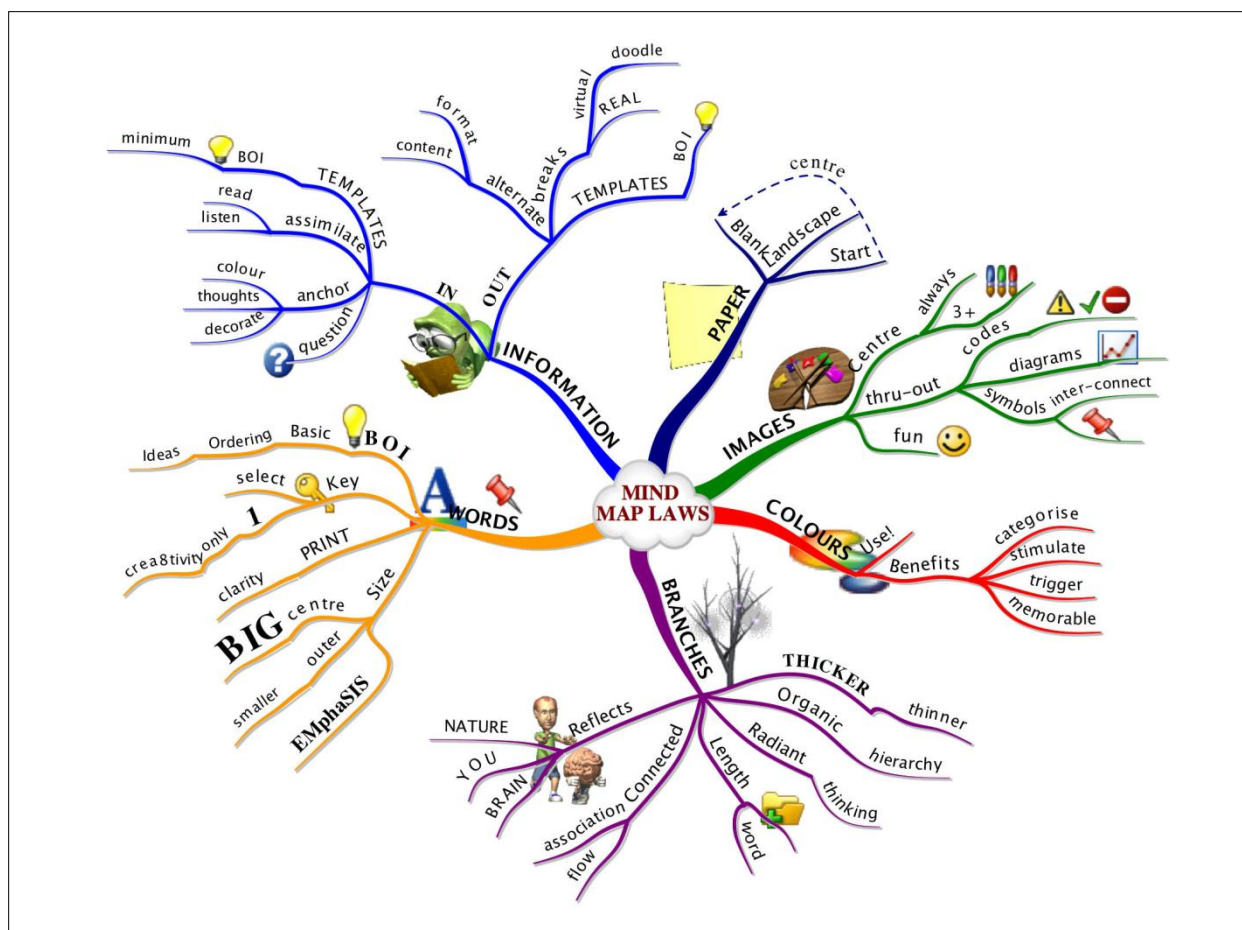
Q: What advantages does visual thinking provide to the executives who utilize it?

Dave Gray: Visual thinking, like mathematics, is a language that you can use to create models of the world, which can help you think more effectively and make better decisions. And like math, it's a

language both of analysis and of synthesis – breaking things down and weaving them together to find new patterns of meaning. Each language has its own inherent strengths and weaknesses. The more languages you can “think in” the better you can think, period.

Q: How does mind mapping fit into the overall scheme of visual thinking?

Dave Gray: Mind mapping is a great place for executives to begin working on their visual thinking skills. It employs one of the most powerful traits of visual thinking – the power of seeing everything in one place, and how everything relates to everything else, in a single frame. Mind mapping can be used to break things down for analysis, or to brainstorm ideas. It’s very flexible, easy to learn and it has broad business applications.



Q: How do you convince linear thinkers to become more visually oriented?

Dave Gray: I think you need to start by making the whole thing less scary. I start by explaining how visual thinking works just like any other language: First you need to learn the alphabet, and then you start putting “letters” together to make words, then sentences and so on. When you break visual thinking down into its components and start with simple things, it becomes less intimidating.

Q: What do you think has to happen for visual thinking to get wider recognition as an essential business skill?

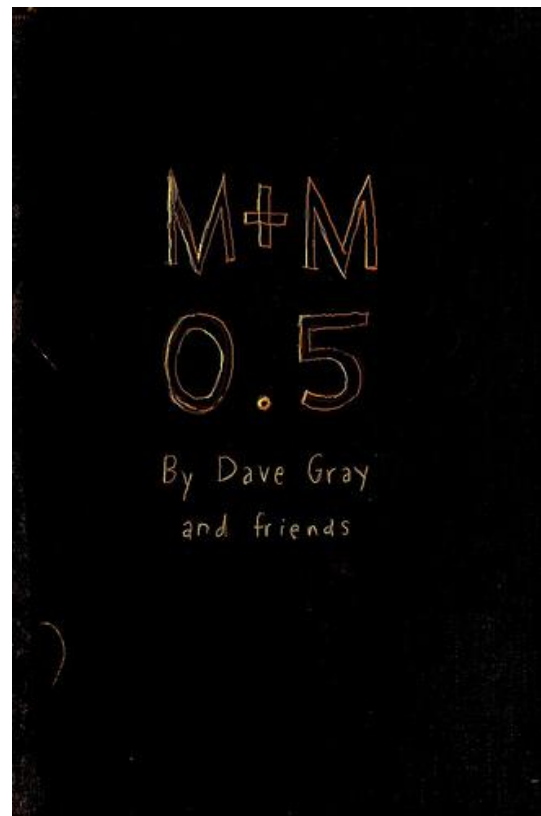
Dave Gray: I’m convinced we need to do a better job of breaking it down into its components and teaching those “fundamentals” more widely and consistently. Written language and math have a very clear learning curve that starts simple and builds its way to complexity. We need to do the same for visual thinking. We need a curriculum.

Q: Tell us a little bit about Marks and Meaning. What inspired you to write this book?

Dave Gray: Marks and Meaning is an “unbook” project – by which I mean, it’s a set of ideas, a notebook of ideas really, that has accepted its “incompleteness.” It’s a document for sharing ideas when they are still fluid and, in a way, untamed, when they are in fact the most interesting.

Q: You've chosen a very unusual model for publishing it. Can you explain what's unique about the "unbook" format and how that will hopefully result in a better end product?

Dave Gray: The unbook is simply something that’s in between a blog and a book. It’s more thoughtful and organized than a blog, but hasn’t quite found its footing as a book yet. Like a blog, it’s a platform for conversation with a community of people that share an interest. Like a conversation, it’s fluid and shifting. The traditional book is a one-way affair: the author preaches at the pulpit and the readers listen. I wanted more – I wanted a conversation.

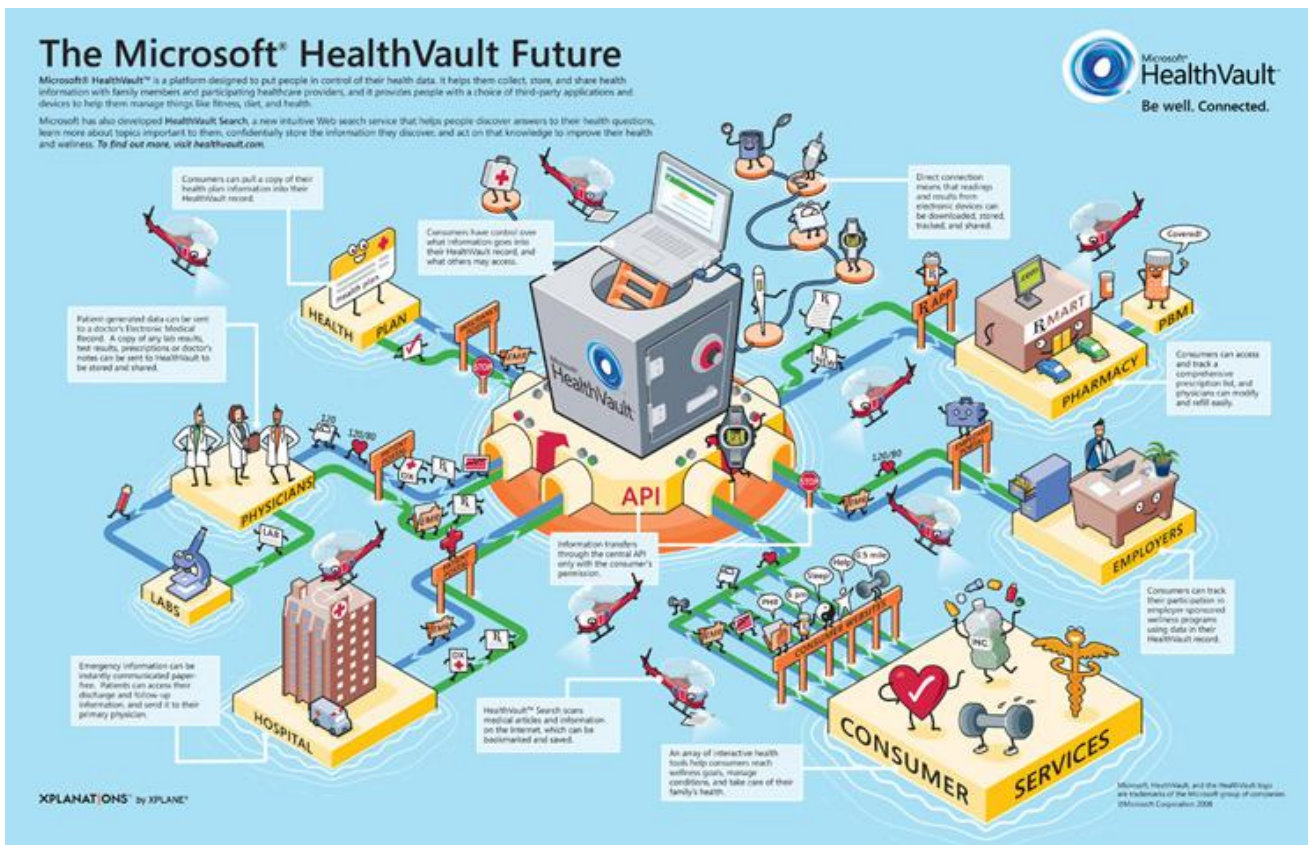


Q: How can the readers of this blog obtain Marks and Meaning?

Dave Gray: They can buy it here: <http://www.lulu.com/content/6811202>

Q: How did you get started in the world of visual thinking, and what led you to the specialty of infographics?

Dave Gray: I've seen myself as an artist for all of my life, and I've always had a passion for learning and exploring new ideas. When you put those two things together, the path leads directly to infographics.



Q: What inspires you about visual thinking?

Dave Gray: Like any language, it's a tool for exploration and discovery. Visual thinking is a tool for imagination, dreaming, thinking and playing. There's no aspect of life where it doesn't have something to offer. There's so much to explore, so much to do. It's a deep well that will never run dry.

Q: In closing, is there anything else about visual thinking that you think it's critical that people know?

Dave Gray: I think visual thinking is a critical thinking skill, like math or logic. Those who spend the time to learn and use it will have an advantage over those who don't. They will be able to think more clearly and imagine more possibilities. The road ahead will be less foggy and opportunities will emerge that others won't see till later. And in an information age, that kind of advantage is significant.

Additional Visual Thinking Resources

[Dave Gray's CommunicationNation Blog](#) – contact Dave at dave.gray@gmail.com

[VizThink](#) – a new association focused on helping people who communicate visually to network with each other.

[Cool Infographics Blog](#)

[Smashing Magazine article on data visualization and infographics](#) – lots of cool examples!

[Flickr: The Info Graphics Pool](#) – a pool or “channel” devoted to collecting and sharing infographics