The Ultimate Guide to Visual Note-Taking Tools
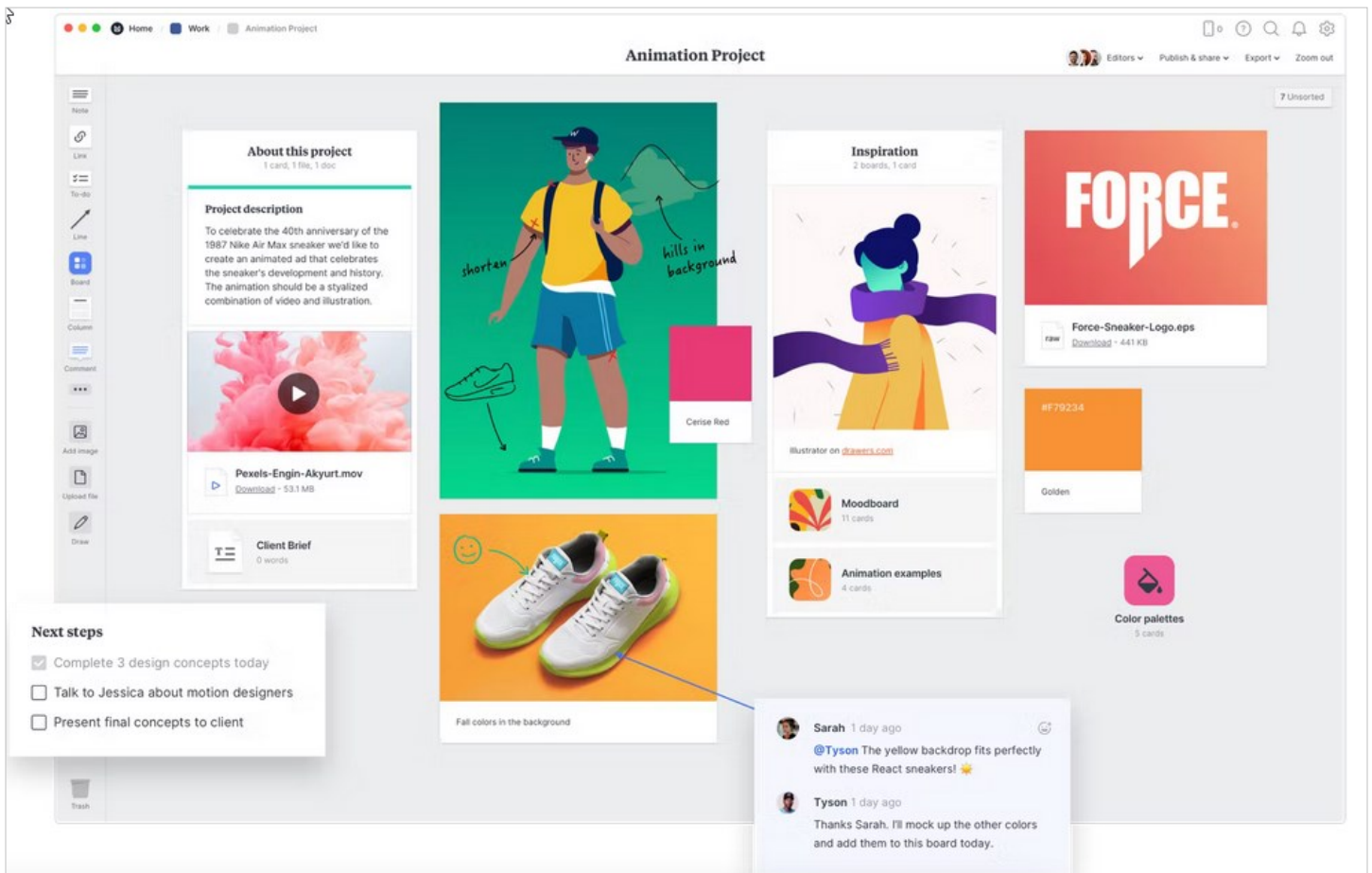
What makes them uniquely valuable? Here's what you need to know about these revolutionary apps!

the mindmapping softwareblog

INTRODUCTION

There's a quiet revolution going on in the world of note-taking applications. While most creators are obsessing over their Notion, Rome and Obsidian setups, a new class of visual note-taking apps are sneaking in under the radar.

These next-generation tools offer powerful brain-enhancing features that make them especially attractive to creators who are looking for something more to nurture their ideas.

By arraying your notes, ideas and collected content on a whiteboard-like canvas, visual note-taking tools open up a world of creative possibilities. That's because your brain is wired to think in pictures. One widely-cited statistic say that your brain processes visuals up to 60,000 times faster than text.

Our creative minds also work by association. Placing ideas and information into a visual context makes it easier for you to perceive connections between seemingly-unrelated bits of information. Visual note-taking notes enable you to connect the dots, and see patterns, implications and trends within your information quite easily.

In addition, a visual canvas also can help you capture more of your thinking. One topic or idea suggests another, which suggests three more, and so forth. You can easily capture all of these new thoughts and ideas, with little or no friction, within an infinite workspace.

Some of your most valuable ideas lie at the periphery of your thinking. These tools help you dig deeper to mine more idea gold from your marvelous brain.

This new report is the ultimate guide to this new class of tools. I hope you find it valuable!
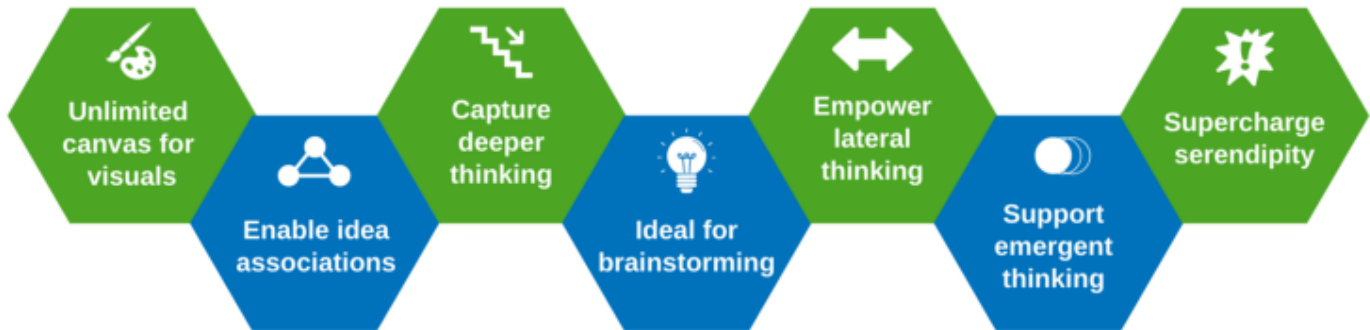
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Creative rocket fuel

Visual note-taking tools unleash a large amount of creative energy that traditional note-taking tools only scratch the surface of.

Unlimited canvas for visuals

Enable idea associations

Capture deeper thinking

Ideal for brainstorming

Empower lateral thinking

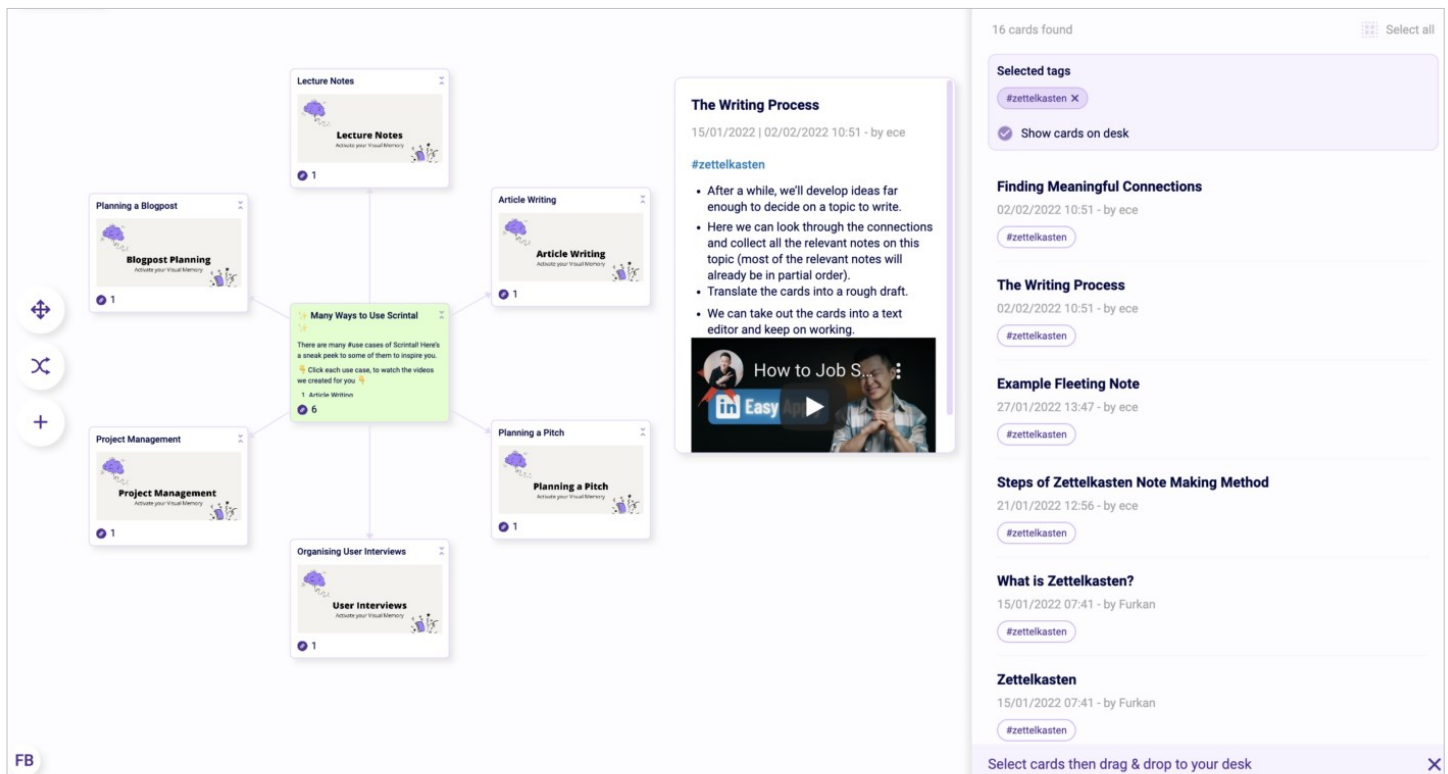Support emergent thinking

Supercharge serendipity

7 advantages of visual note-taking tools

These are powers that traditional note-taking tools don't support or minimally address. They're what make these new tools so special!

Visually organize and manage your work

See more of your thoughts in relationship to each other

Drag and drop your ideas in arrangements that make sense

Enhanced opportunities for dot connecting and serendipity

Visualize your creative process and move forward faster

Bring greater clarity to your ideas, tasks and projects

7 valuable use cases for visual note-taking tools

All of the applications described in this report have one important thing in common: They utilize a canvas interface that enables you to capture nearly any kind of content with a minimum of friction and then organize, distill and share it in ways that make the most sense to you.

Where text-based note-taking tools start to feel one-dimensional and linear after a while, visual note-taking tools give users a feeling of freedom. They're also more likely to spark serendipitous connections,

making them a favorite of creatives of all stripes.

Here are seven applications that visual note-taking tools empower:

1 **Outlining/writing/content creation**

Content of any kind - a blog post, a video, infographic or ebook - is a combination of ideas and elements, arranged to tell a story, teach a process or inspire a feeling.

To create a cohesive piece of content,

the writer needs to organize his or her thoughts. These tools provide a flexible canvas where you can do so, quickly and easily.
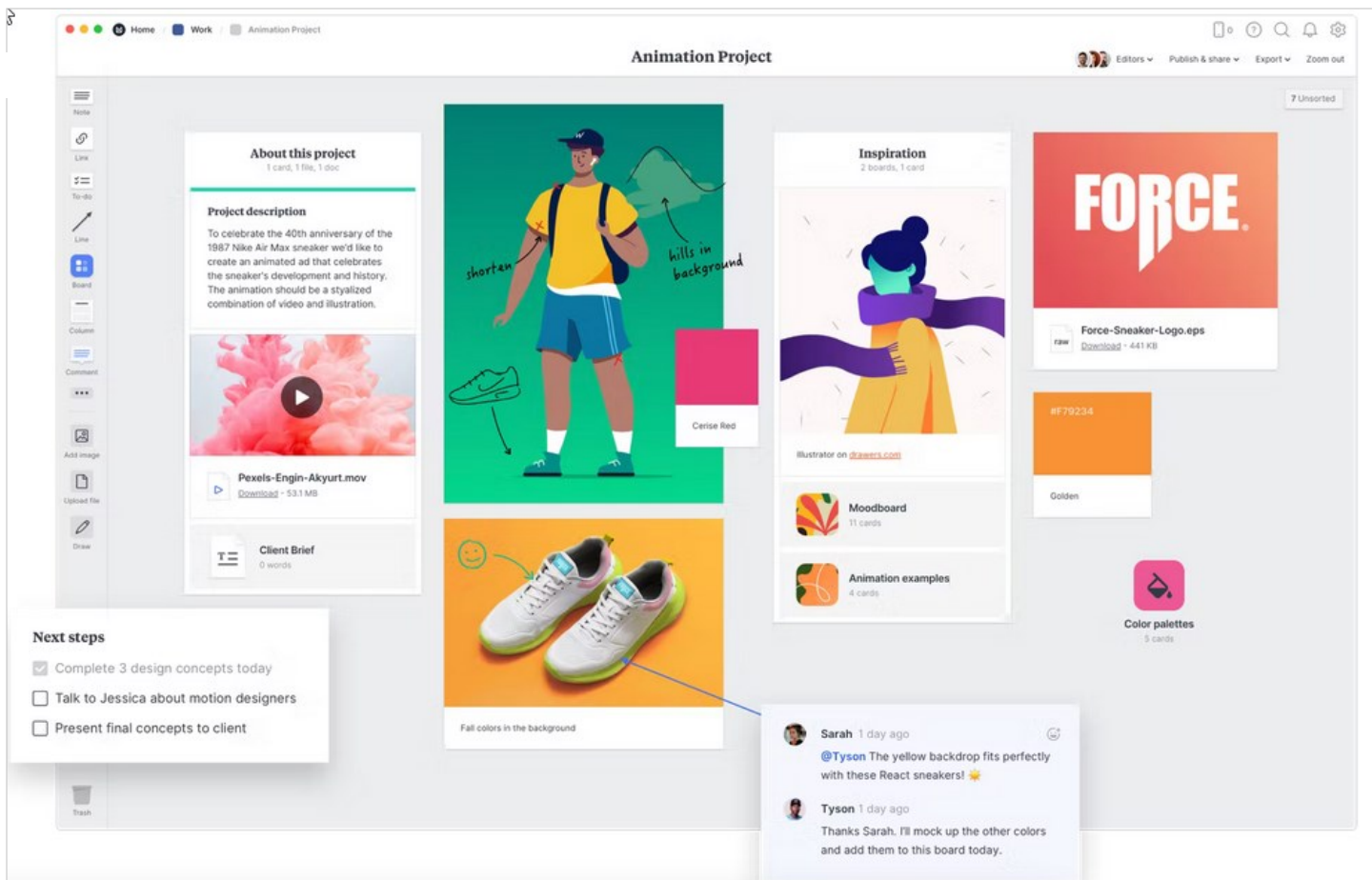
Arranging the "atoms" of your content visually makes it easy to see what's missing, what needs to be clarified and what's extraneous and can be removed.
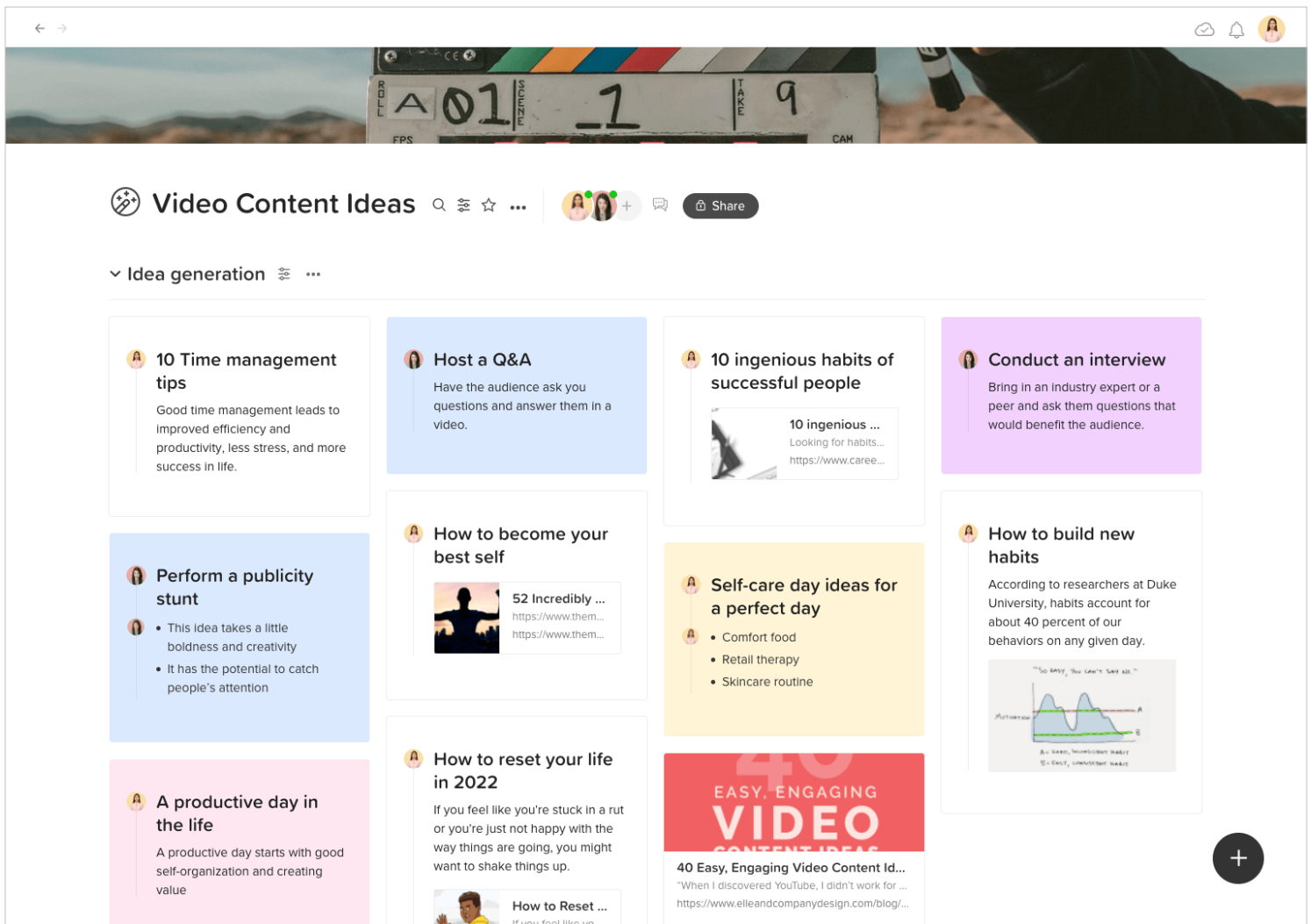
2 Research

Conducting research is often a messy process. You gather bits and pieces of information,

knowledge and ideas from numerous sources and try to analyze it all in one place. For many people, that's a Word or Google document. But that quickly becomes unworkable as the number of pages and bits of information expands.

The open canvas of a visual note-taking tool is perfect for capturing the flotsam and jetsam of research. They make it easy to collect a myriad of information without having to worry about how to organize it. You can move it into logical groupings later.

Video Content Ideas

Idea generation

10 Time management tips
Good time management leads to improved efficiency and productivity, less stress, and more success in life.

Host a Q&A
Have the audience ask you questions and answer them in a video.

10 ingenious habits of successful people
10 ingenious ...
Looking for habits...
https://www.caree...

Conduct an interview
Bring in an industry expert or a peer and ask them questions that would benefit the audience.

Perform a publicity stunt
- This idea takes a little boldness and creativity
- It has the potential to catch people's attention

How to become your best self
52 Incredibly ...
https://www.them...
https://www.them...

Self-care day ideas for a perfect day
- Comfort food
- Retail therapy
- Skincare routine

How to build new habits
According to researchers at Duke University, habits account for about 40 percent of our behaviors on any given day.

A productive day in the life
A productive day starts with good self-organization and creating value

How to reset your life in 2022
If you feel like you're stuck in a rut or you're just not happy with the way things are going, you might want to shake things up.
How to Reset ...
If you feel like yo...

EASY, ENGAGING VIDEO CONTENT IDEAS
40 Easy, Engaging Video Content Id...
"When I discovered YouTube, I didn't work for ...
https://www.elleandcompanydesign.com/blog/...

③ Swipe file

Creative people, such as writers, copywriters and designers, find great value in creating a swipe file to hold the bits and pieces of ideas that inspire them.

The idea is to build a collection of inspiring objects you think may be useful or intriguing in some way. When you need inspiration, you can use your swipe file as a source of relevant stimuli.

Visual note-taking tools make it possible to create multiple swipe files around different topics. They can also contain a variety of media, organized in collections that are most useful to you.

④ Second brain

A "second brain" is an externalized, digital collection of ideas, notes, knowledge and insights—a personal knowledge base.

Visual thinking tools are especially valuable in this role because they enable serendipity more easily than traditional text-based note-taking tools do. Their flexible canvas makes it easier to view ideas side-by-side and make connections between them - a key aspect of nurturing your thoughts.

5 Idea repository

Smart people are obsessive about capturing their ideas, any time, anywhere. They know that ideas are fleeting, mysterious creatures. They tend to disappear as quickly as they appear.

So they maintain a database of ideas that they can use to capture their latest insights and inspirations in tangible form.

An idea repository is a growing collection of personal ideas. Visual note-taking tools make it easy to capture whatever inspires you, and then arrange and rearrange it as needed.

6 Planning

Whether you're doing business planning, creating a marketing plan or mapping out your firm's strategy, visual note-taking tools provide a flexible canvas on which you can capture, nurture and organize your thinking and any even show your thinking process.

7 Moodboard/creative concepting

Professional creatives know that there are very few new-to-the-world ideas. Most new ideas are inspired by what has come before. That's why they gather inspiring visuals into a display called a moodboard. Often, the keywords and associations contained in the images arrayed in front of them will spur new ideas.

Visual note-taking tools are perfect for creating moodboards. Because they employ an unlimited visual canvas and support images, videos and text-based notes, these tools make it easy to collect and organize a variety of elements that may be relevant to the creative project you're working on.

Criteria for selection

The digital note-taking space is growing like crazy, It seems like new apps are being launched every week. It's hard to keep up!

When I created this report as a follow-up to my popular Medium article, [The Future of Note-Taking is Visual](), I was faced with a dilemma: How to focus its content in a meaningful way?

I quickly realized I needed to limit its content to those tools that are purpose-built to help creators and entrepreneurs to capture, nurture and share their ideas—not those that are designed primarily for knowledge management or for creating enhanced documents.

Therefore, it doesn't cover tools like Infinity Maps and Craft. I'm more interested in highlighting those that support and enhance the creative process.

Here are the criteria I used to focus the apps profiled in this report:

1. *They employ a whiteboard-like canvas interface, which enables ideas and elements to be arranged with complete freedom.*
2. *They enable you to see multiple ideas in relationship to each other, increasing serendipity.*
3. *They enable you to think laterally, spreading your ideas out in all directions.*
4. *They support emergent thinking. This school of thought says that you should not force your ideas into a predetermined structure too early. Rather, the ideas should suggest their own structure, which should emerge gradually.*
5. *They are designed to maximize your "A-ha!" moments in ways that linear note-taking tools just can't make possible.*

XTILES

Summary: In xTiles, a "tile" is the building block of your ideas, a container that can hold text, images, video and more. Tiles can be moved around the workspace, so you can organize your projects. Tabs are another way to organize your work.
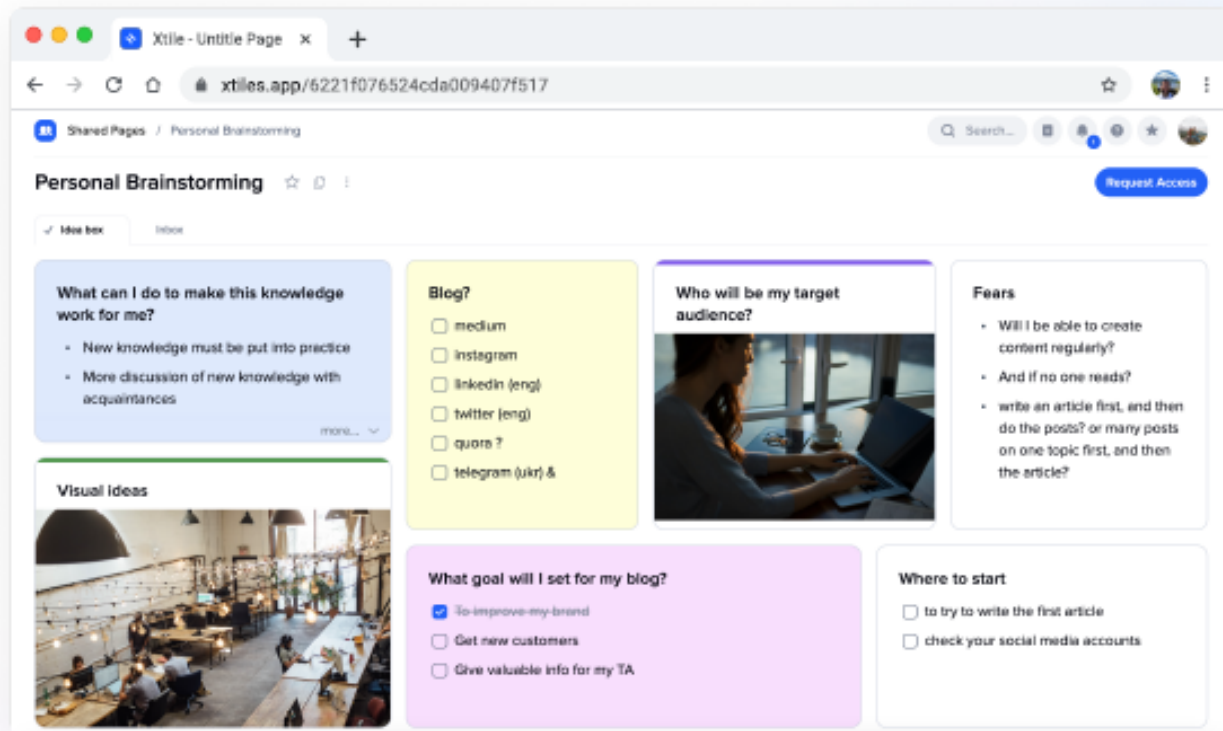
Notable features: Cards can be collapsed or expanded into a "deep dive" view. Sub-pages enable you to nest information, so you can capture deep information and keep it all organized. xTiles offers a mobile app and a Chrome extension so you can add information to your workspaces any time, anywhere.

Developer resources:
- [xTiles website](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [YouTube tutorial series](#)
- [xTiles Medium page](#)

Additional articles/reviews:
- [Simplicity, Visualization, Consensus: xTiles Unveils its Core Values](#)
- [3 Features You Will Love xTiles For](#)
- [xTiles Helps You Do these Tasks Faster](#)
- [xTiles app review - the productivity lovechild of Notion and Miro?](#) (video))
- [Capture the big picture with Maks Kuchur, founder of xTiles](#)

xTiles

Organize your ideas & projects visually

xTiles is a personal workspace favored by creatives that combines the best from note-taking apps, text editors and whiteboards.

Available for beta **Apple** | GET IT ON **Google Play** | **Web Clipper**

01

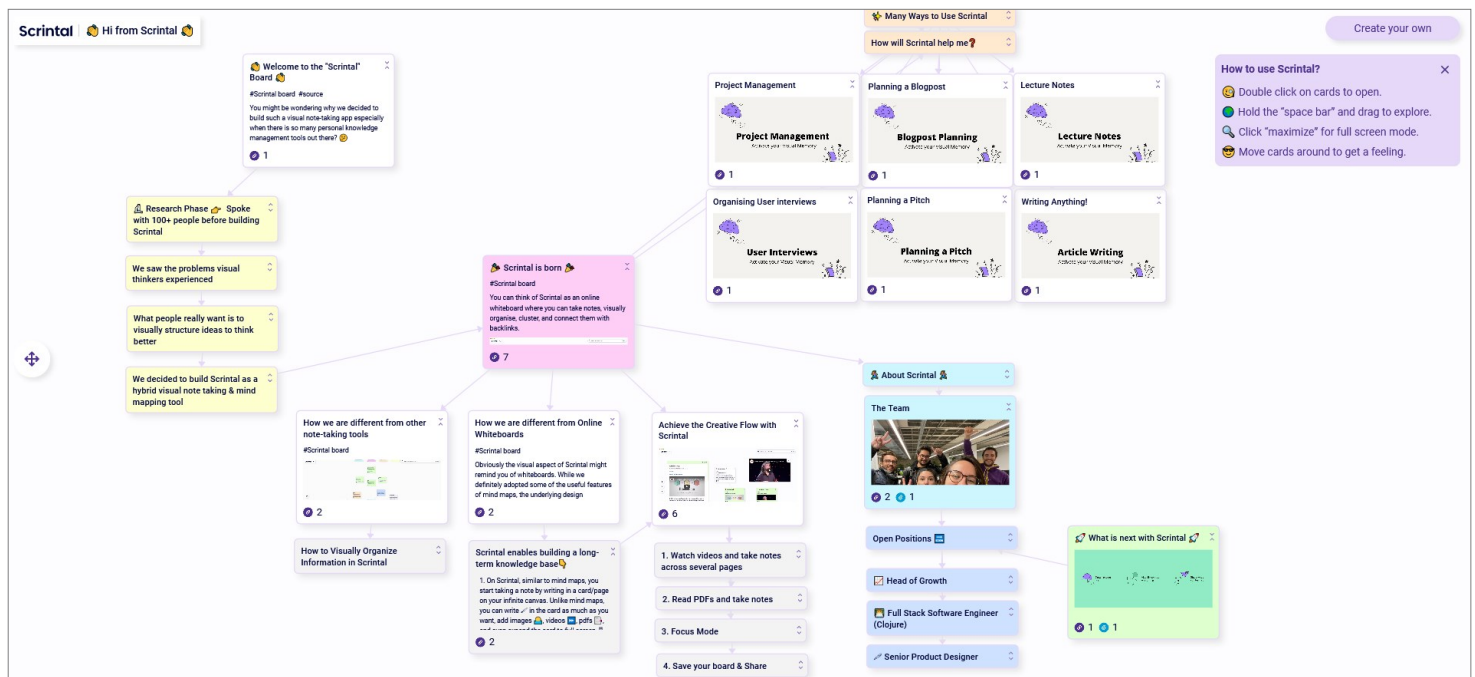Unload your thoughts by creating a personal layout with notes, links and media.

02

Visualize your creative working process by mixing and matching pieces of info.

03

Build a single source of truth for work and personal activities.

SCRINTAL

Summary: Scrintal is a remarkable personal knowledge management tool that combines the power of mind mapping with networked note-taking. It's ideal for researchers, writers and anyone who needs to manage projects or knowledge visually.

It supports block editing, a popular feature of the leading note-taking tools, flexible linking and tagging and the ability to "extract" rich media from the note that contains it.

Notable features: It's easy to add media to your note, including an image, PDF, video link and more. You can also copy and paste tweets. Into your Scrintal workspace

Developer resources:

- [Scrintal website](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Medium blog](#)
- [YouTube](#)

Additional articles/reviews:

- [Read my review of it here](#)
- [Using Scrintal For My Ship30for30 Essays](#)
- [Why Scrintal App is Beyond Mind Mapping in Your PKM](#)
- [How Does Clear Visualization Help Your Brain Connect Ideas?](#)

NAPKIN

Summary: Napkin enables you to place notes within a simple visual canvas. It also adds AI to the mix, suggesting connections between notes. This takes visual serendipity to whole new level! Ideas can be manually or automatically tagged for future retrieval. Related ideas are displayed in a "swarm" or crowd of notes surrounding your currently-selected note.

Notable feature: AI surfaces related notes, giving you super-serendipity powers. A capture app makes it easy to painlessly gather inspirations from multiple sources.
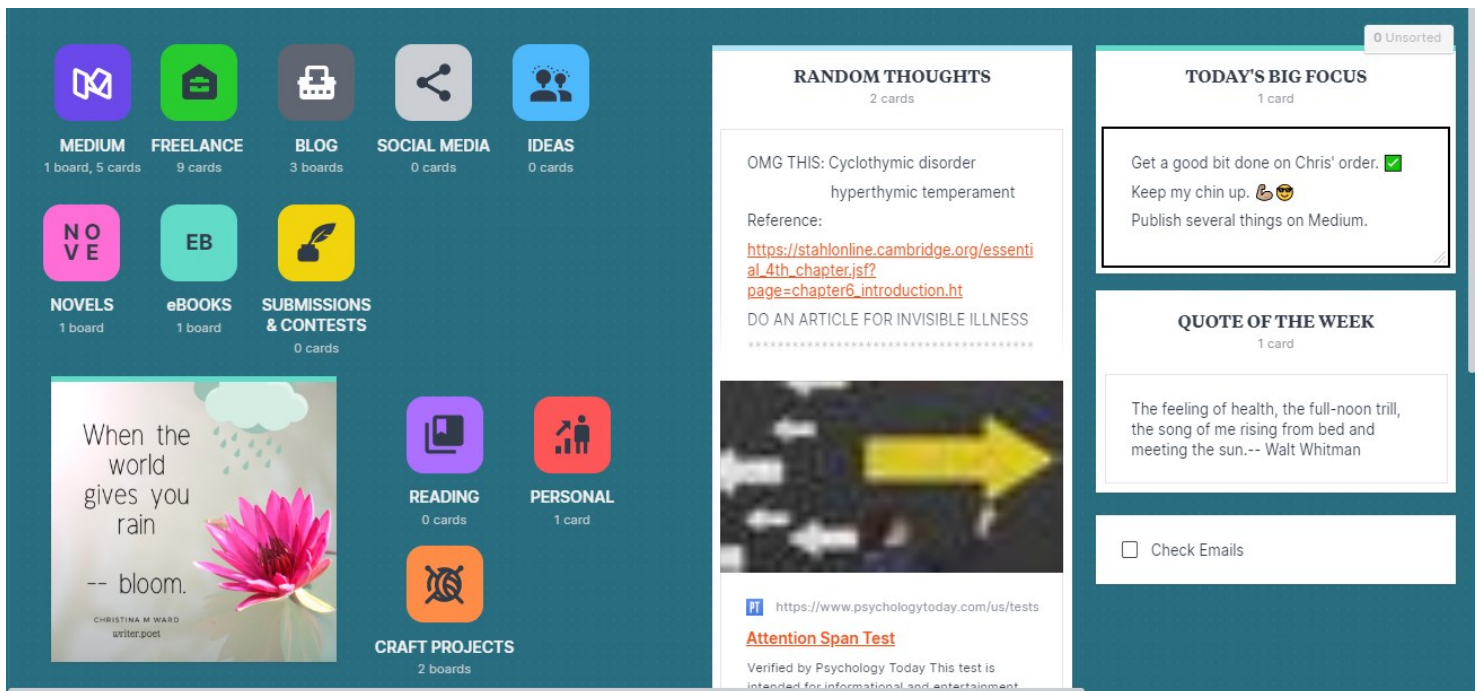
Developer resources:
- [Napkin website](#)
- [Twitter page](#)
- [YouTube channel](#)
- [Napkin Community](#)

Additional articles/reviews:
- [My interview with Napkin's co-founder](#)
- [Napkin: A note app like our memory?](#)
- [A Napkin for your ideas](#) (WonderTools review)
- [Use Napkin to write faster, better blogs](#)
- [How to outline an article in Napkin](#)

MILANOTE

Summary: Picture a cross between a digital note-taking tool, a mind mapping application and a digital moodboard. That's what Milanote offers. The application gives you access to hundreds of templates — everything from brainstorming and and mind maps to creative briefs and project plans. Or you can start out with a blank workspace and follow your own path.

Notable feature: Milanote provides users with a really positive first experience. As soon as you hover over a toolbar icon, a helpful pop-up tooltip explains what to do next. A Chrome browser web clipper enables you to save images from the web in a single click. In addition to text and images, you can also add links, files and tasks to your Milanote workspace. Lost? Simply click the forward slash key on your keyboard and a "cheat sheet" pops up with a brief summary of how to accomplish the most common tasks in Milanote.
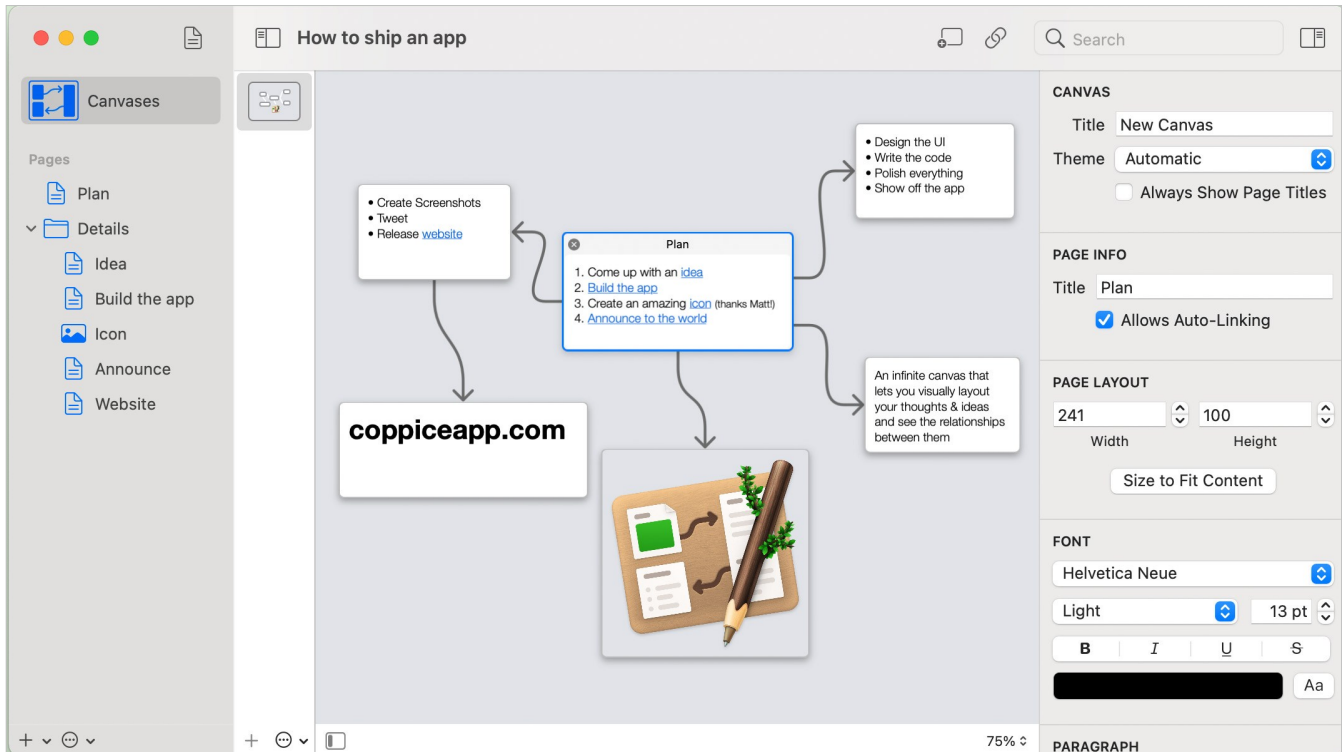.

Developer resources:
- [Milanote website](#)
- [Twitter page](#)

Additional articles/reviews:
- [Read my review of Milanote](#)
- [Milanote for Creative Organization](#)
- [Organize your creative ideas](#)
- [The Best New Creative Tool in my Tech Toolkit is Milanote](#)

COPPICE

Summary: Coppice combines the best elements of note-taking applications with the ability to link pages together — like a visual wiki or a mind map on steroids. Pages enable you to add rich content. Like a wiki, you can link pages together. And your thoughts can be connected to each other, like in a mind map or diagram.

Notable feature: The concept of pages enables multiple views of the same content. A page can exist on any number of canvases in Coppice, and updating it in one place will update it everywhere. With automatic page linking. Coppice looks for page titles in the content of your pages. As you type into a text page, the application will see if what you typed matched up to any page's title, and create a link to that page automatically.
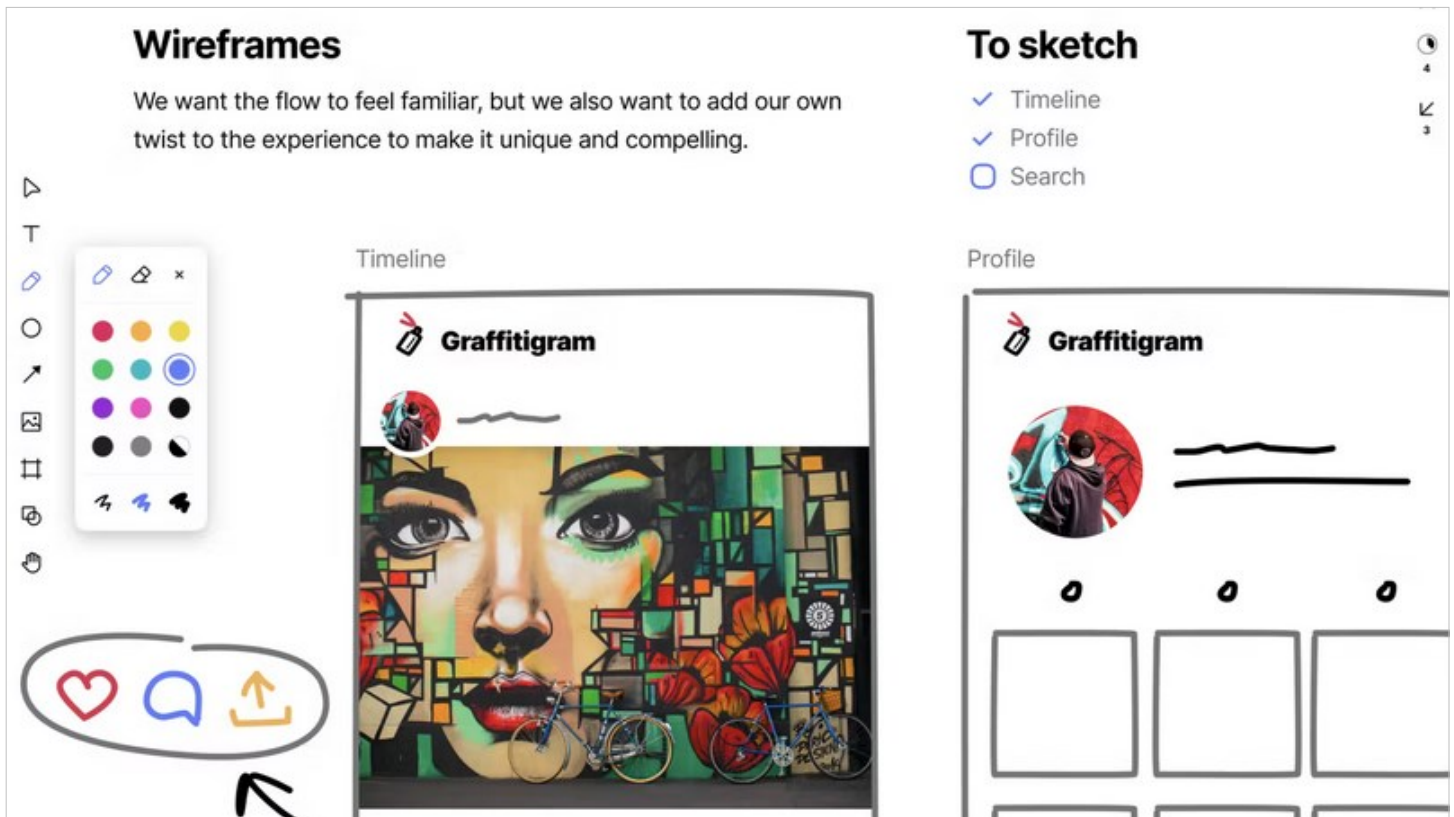
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Developer resources:

- [Coppice website](#)
- [YouTube channel](#)

Additional articles/reviews:

- [Read my interview with the developer of Coppice](#)

CLOVER

Summary: This application offers a canvas that supports text, shapes, images and sketching, plus a "daily notes" area for capturing longer, text-based inspirations. It also enables linking between pages and a "quick notes" tool that enables you to capture ideas fast. Daily pages help you stay organized, with a combination of a calendar, tasks and notes.

Notable feature: Within Clover, a surface is a multimedia canvas where you can work with others to create visual designs using a variety of media, including imported images, text, shapes and sketches. The pro version supports labels, which are similar to tags. They help you to keep the content in your personal knowledge base organized.
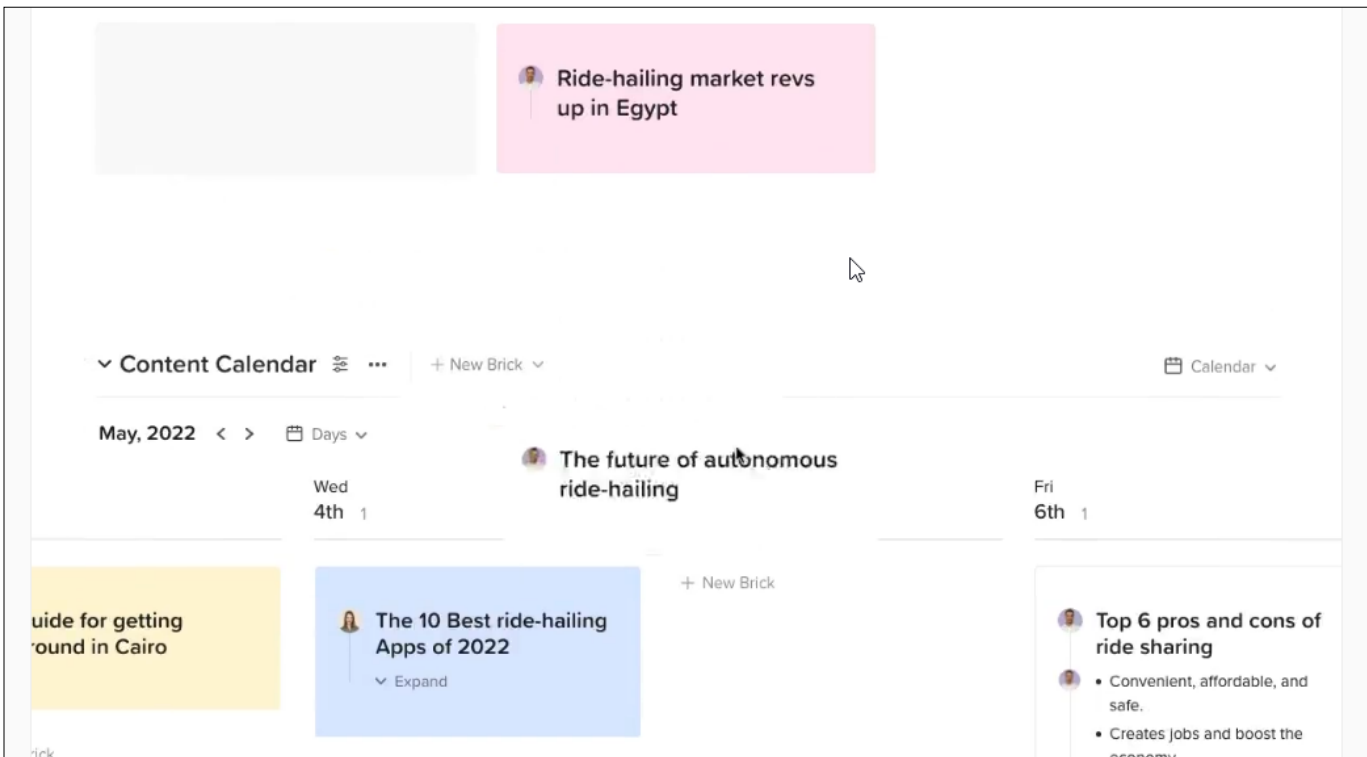
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Developer resources:
- [Clover website](#)
- [Twitter](#)

Additional articles/reviews:
- [Make your ideas a reality with Clover](#) (video interview)
- [Beginner's Guide to Clover: Getting Started](#) (video)
- [Clover Made Simple - a free course](#)(video)

WALLING

Summary: This app mixes project management with productivity, using a rich, flexible visual canvas. Walls, Sections, and Bricks provide a hierarchy of ideas, connections, and plotting. A wall can contain many different types of content. You can add sections to help organize it.

Sections are divided into bricks. Each is a mini-document that can contain images, videos, checklists, bulleted lists, documents and links that are relevant to your project.

Notable features: The Daily Desk is ideal for those spontaneous ideas or inspirations you want to investigate and develop later. Using the navigation arrows beside the date, you can access all your ideas. Walling enables you to export your walls as markdown, PDF or HTML.
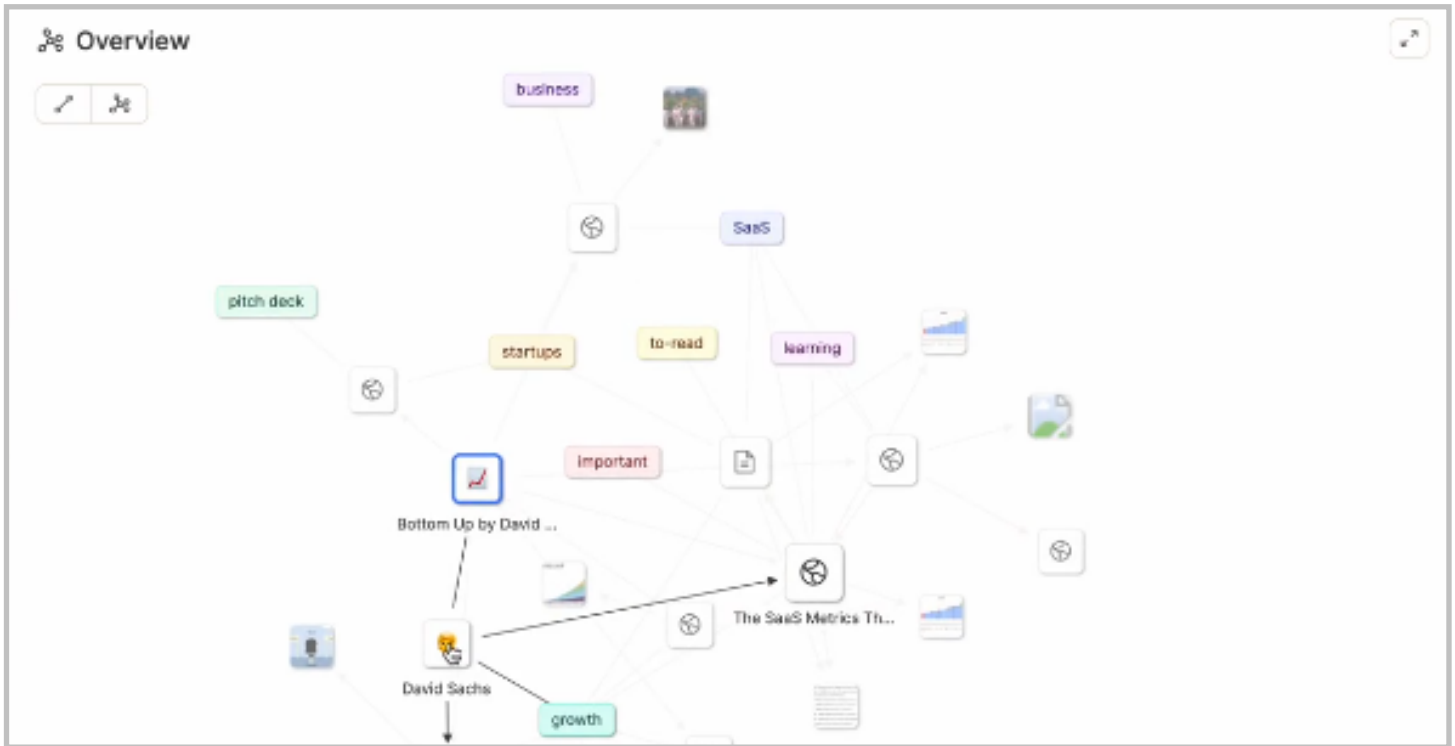.

Developer resources:
- [Walling website](#)
- [Twitter](#)

Additional articles/reviews:
- [Walling quick review by the Keep Productive blog](#)
- [Walling Review - Is this the next Notion or Google Keep?](#) (video)
- [6 Features of the Walling App to Visually Arrange Tasks](#)
- [How to Visually Organize Ideas and Share Them With Your Team Using the Walling App](#) (video)

CAPACITIES

Summary: Capacities aims to make the process of associating your thoughts easier and more intuitive. Every single element that you've added can be linked and embedded in any other note. Capacities also offers a visual overview that makes it easy to see and explore the context of your notes. It automatically organizes and structures all your content into collections.

Notable features: Use the chronological overview to go back in time and review what you've created. Capacities enables you to save tweets and threads from Twitter. In another unique twist, it allows you to create notes based on people, book summaries, or questions. Each content type in Capacities has its own unique set of custom properties, which enables you to personalize it more to your needs. If you have unique needs, you can create a custom content type.

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Developer resources:
- Capacities website
- Blog
- Twitter
- YouTube

Additional articles/reviews:
- Create a network of thoughts with Capacities (Ness Labs interview)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The productivity tools space is in the midst of a global arms race, as scrappy startups with unique ideas fight for attention against larger, more established players.

The world of digital note-taking tools began humbly enough with Evernote over 10 years ago. Based upon its meteoric success, the next wave of note-taking tools, which includes Notion, Obsidian and Roam Research, have been fighting for dominance during the last several years. Visual note-taking tools are the latest wave of apps that are poised to innovate this fast-growing space.

How can you keep all of these tools straight and determine which ones are best for you? Here are the sources I trust:

- The Keep Productive YouTube channel
- Ness Labs' Tools for Thought series
- WonderTools

Questions?

Contact me at chuck@chuckfrey.com.

Don't miss my latest insights about visual note-taking and other visual thinking tools.

Sign up today for my free weekly newsletter