



Mind tiles: Building new ideas

One good, workable idea often comes from two others being combined. For example, Johannes Gutenberg, the 15th Century inventor of the printing press, combined the idea of the pressure provided by a wine press, with the idea of the imprint put on coins in the city mint. His printing press with moveable type was a breakthrough leap from two well-established technologies. It also combined two apparently *disconnected* processes or ideas. You can stimulate ideas-building in *your* organisation by using the mind tiles technique: placing unlikely concepts side by side to see what they might produce.

Mind tiles

The basic principle behind mind tiles is very straight-forward: you try to create a third idea by building on a combination of two others. At its simplest, you make a new product from two existing ones, just like Gutenberg's printing press.

For example, a famous ski equipment company were struggling to connect to the youth market. From their research they discovered that this potentially lucrative market saw the sport as old fashioned, middle class and boring. Desperate to create a modern youth image, the company turned to mind tiles for inspiration. They wrote the word 'skis' on dozens of paper tiles and then wrote things that appealed to youth culture on others.

These ranged from pop music to video games to dancing, etc. They had to generate a lot of ideas for this to work, and to accept that the vast majority would go nowhere. You have to imagine a wall filled with paper tiles – all combining a random idea or concept relevant to youth with the word 'skis'. They then came up with a number of bizarre combinations on the third tile such as "skis + walkman = skis with built in music", or "skis + computer games = virtual reality ski game". But one set of tiles, in the middle of dozens of other combinations, leaped out:



You see, snowboarding was not invented by radical urban youth. It was invented by dull marketing consultants in a brainstorming session using mind tiles. There's hope for us all.

Mind tiles in your organisation

You can use mind tiles in your organisation to come up with new products, services or techniques.

First, you must decide on a clear purpose. We're going to use a Canadian cancer charity as an example here. The Charity decided to use mind tiles to find *new ways of using the internet to fundraise*.

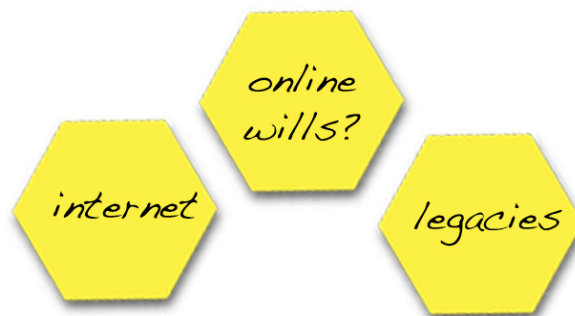
Then, make lists of existing products, events or activities that relate to your purpose. The Canadian cancer charity listed about 25 of their current fundraising techniques, such as planned giving, special events, legacies, etc.

Next, write all of the items on your lists onto post-it notes, more than once. The Canadian cancer charity wrote a whole load of post-its with their different fundraising techniques, and even more with the word 'internet' on them.

As a group, stick the tiles onto a large wall in a series of random combinations, making sure that you have more than one of each possible combination. Then, you move around the combinations thinking of a new product or idea that physically connects the two other tiles, and write this on a third tile. For example, the Canadian cancer charity might have come up with "internet + special events = webinar", or "internet + phone-a-thon = twitterthon".

Finally, as a group, work your way around the whole wall seeing if you can make any more combinations. The reason you have more than one version of each combination is because you may well come up with more than one output for a specific combination. It's important to say 99% of the ideas gathering on the wall will be *terrible*. Or at least not *practical*. But they're creative ideas. And you only need one good one from the whole wall ...

When the Canadian cancer charity did this, they got around 30 combination ideas, most of which were judged to be useless or impractical. But one – legacies + internet – produced the idea of 'online wills', a service where you log onto the charity's website and a special program helps you write your will. Once it's completed, you can then download and print it off. The service costs just \$50 to users – which makes it a lot cheaper than a lawyer. And you can not only write your will online, you can also make a donation to the charity at the same time, and maybe leave a legacy. And many people do.



More ideas for using Mind tiles

You can use mind tiles in a range of different contexts, to come up with new ways of delivering services, raising money, or ways of working.

When the NSPCC wanted to come up with a new kind of fundraising event, they used mind tiles. With this technique they put together two seemingly disconnected pursuits: car boot sales and visits to stately homes. And the result was the Stately Car Boot Sale, where people could only bring upscale antiques to the sale. This new concept helped the NSPCC raise thousands of pounds.

A small town in the US used mind tiles to improve service delivery, by putting up tiles of things residents were unhappy about, combined with the internet. One combination, car parks full + internet, led them to create a website that contained information about car park availability which could be picked up by WAP phones.

You can also write your organisational goals on one set of tiles and on another set put the names of individuals or teams. In this case the third tile is a way in which they can contribute to the goal. So you might have 'Mabel Smith', receptionist, on one tile and 'build the strategic plan' on another. Then you're looking for empowerment ideas.

So if your department has a tricky problem to solve, or just needs some new ideas, why not try mind tiles?

Top tips for making mind tiles work for you:

- have a clear purpose
- have a big wall
- have lots of 'tiles' made or use big post-its
- play music upbeat music while people do it – it stimulates the ideas
- make sure everyone *stands* while they do it – it improves the creativity
- use different coloured pens to write on the tiles
- ensure there are no comments made indicating mindsets or judgments on the combinations – the point is to have *lots* of ideas
- do the exercise fairly quickly – this way you'll get more of a 'creative burst'

Further help

If you're interested in finding new ways of using creativity in *your* organisation, why not come on our one-day **Creativity and Innovation** workshop? You'll gain a whole range of techniques to help you and your colleagues come up with new ideas, as well as learning about how best to turn those ideas into improved results.

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