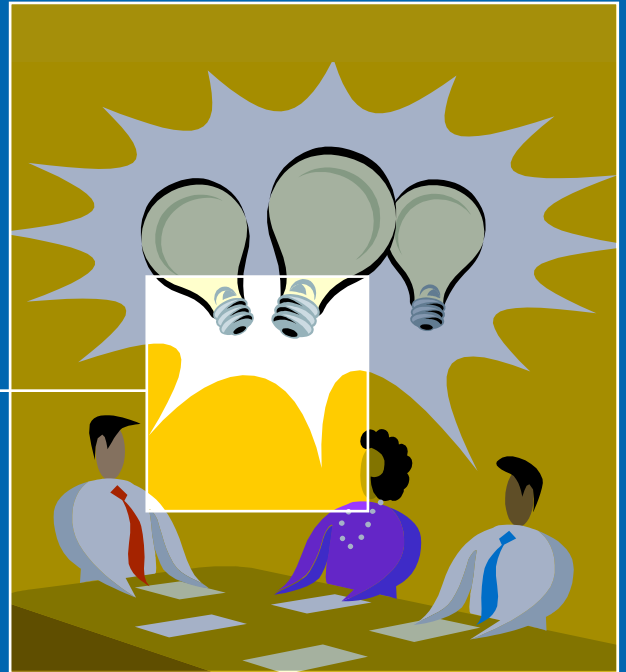


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Blue Papers



Brainstorming to Success

Brainstorming a makeover: how this time-served business practice can be improved with blitzing, brainswarming and collaborative tools

It's a familiar scene. A group gathers in a board room with the intention of sharing ideas and solutions to a particular problem. Sticky notes might be involved, along with flip charts or a whiteboard. Participants are told two heads are better than one and that no idea is a bad one, and to share whatever they are thinking. It's called brainstorming and many companies embrace it as an effective tool to prompt creativity and to find unique solutions to difficult problems. The idea actually dates back to the 1940s when American Advertising Executive Alex Osborn believed that anyone could learn to generate creative solutions for a wide variety of problems. Today, it is by far the most widely used tool to stimulate creative thinking.



But did you know that research suggests 90% of companies may be conducting brainstorming sessions incorrectly?¹ And if you do it incorrectly, it might not produce the best ideas. Even worse, it might actually impede productivity and morale. Like anything, brainstorming has room for improvement, and advances in technology and new tools suggest that it's time to give brainstorming a makeover. Simply, by adopting new tools and methods it can be made more effective. After all, it's still a great way to develop a number of incremental ideas, plus, it creates a feel-good atmosphere that can help gain buy-in for significant change.

This Blue Paper explores the holistic practice of brainstorming. It will look at why it remains a popular method, despite its flaws. It will also provide insight into some of the common pitfalls and why some experts suggest it needs a renovation to overcome those challenges. It provides modern-day tips for more effective brainstorming to make the most of your collective thoughts and ideas. And, this paper will look at some of the innovative brainstorming techniques, and summarise the top brainstorming and collaborative tools that your company might explore. So dust off your thinking cap, because it's time to modernise the brainstorming model.

Brainstorming benefits

There are many reasons why a company might want to give brainstorming a

¹ "Who Says Brainstorming Doesn't Work?" Zurb. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://zurb.com/article/920/who-says-brainstorming-doesn-t-work>

second look. Today, especially when you infuse modern day concepts, it can provide a significant boost to your efforts. But even old-school brainstorming can be beneficial. No one denies that it's still the best way to quickly develop a large amount of creative ideas in a short time. Overall, brainstorming:

- Generates more ideas collectively than an individual working alone
- Builds on and combines the ideas of others, bringing more ideas to the forefront, especially when it's done face-to face
- Exposes participants to the ideas of others
- Promotes creativity

Brainstorming remains a popular method because it's a low cost approach to producing a high volume of ideas. It brings together participants with different knowledge and experiences that can lead to innovative solutions. Some claim it can improve the working atmosphere because working creatively motivates employees and raises morale. And, it can be a fun way to help team members bond, as they solve problems in a positive, rewarding environment. In addition, if the brainstorming session involves significant changes or improvements, members are more likely to offer support when they were involved in developing it. Because of these benefits, experts say brainstorming is still an effective way to obtain a wide range of ideas.

Not only can brainstorming provide immediate, positive feedback, but participants also leave a brainstorming session proud of their contribution. It provides instant gratification when a whiteboard or flip chart is filled with ideas. And when it works, it can actually boost productivity because changes are implemented more effectively. Moreover, brainstorming affords a free and open environment that encourages everyone to participate. Quirky ideas are welcomed and built upon, and all participants are encouraged to contribute fully, helping them develop a rich array of creative solutions. In the best case scenario, brainstorming doesn't just harvest ideas, it combines and extends them.²



A hospital in the US city Cincinnati, for example, realised tangible benefits from brainstorming. The group held a five-day brainstorming session with 35 of its doctors and staff to reduce the emergency room wait times and the length-of-stay for admitted patients. Thanks to a successful brainstorming session that generated creative ideas and solutions, the hospital reduced emergency room patient wait times from 40 minutes to only 12 minutes, which represents a 70% decrease.³ In

² Robert Sutton. "Eight Tips for Better Brainstorming." Bloomberg Business Week. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2006-07-25/eight-tips-for-better-brainstorming>

³ Ashley Gold. "Innovation, Brainstorming Reduce ER Wait times." FierceHealthcare. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.fiercehealthcare.com/story/innovation-brainstorming-reduce-er-wait-times/2013-08-19>

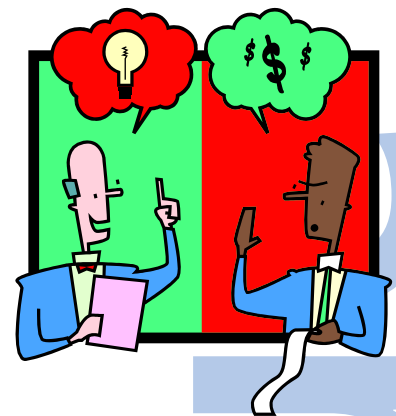
addition, the average length-of-stay for admitted patients also dropped from 394 minutes to 292 minutes.⁴ This offers proof that when a collective group tackles a problem, the results can be positive and profitable.

However, if you're still using old-school methods, you may not be making the most of brainstorming. It can be enhanced, and become even more effective when it's infused with a fresh approach before, during and after a brainstorming session. The work you do before brainstorming can particularly improve your chances of success. This is in direct contradiction to earlier thinking that a brainstorming session should start with only a vague idea and evolve organically. In fact, in today's climate, experts say that advance preparation is the most important step you can take to ensure an effective session. How you can prepare for brainstorming will be addressed in subsequent sections, but in the meantime, let's explore some of the common complaints of brainstorming as it's most usually conducted today.

Challenges to traditional brainstorming

Just because brainstorming is beneficial, it doesn't mean there aren't a few flaws to be addressed. True, brainstorming is a practice that's been used for over 60 years - so why after all this time does it need a makeover? Simply, as times change, so can this age-old process. Access to new technology and expertise has increased over the years, but many companies still rely on old-school methods.

As noted earlier, long-standing brainstorming methods have some weaknesses, which have been acknowledged over the years and recently resurfaced. According to neuroscientist Jonah Lehrer: "Decades of research has consistently shown that brainstorming groups think of far fewer ideas than the same number of people who work alone, and later pool their ideas."⁵ Although brainstorming can be an ideal technique and a feel-good way to boost productivity, some experts claim that it doesn't always provide the value intended. In fact, a comprehensive study from researchers at the US University Texas A&M showed that brainstorming is not always the best strategy to generate unique and varied ideas.⁶ Indeed, there are several reasons why experts say that traditional brainstorming has a downside. Specifically, it may lead to:



⁴ Ashley Gold. "Innovation, Brainstorming Reduce ER Wait times." *FierceHealthcare*. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.fiercehealthcare.com/story/innovation-brainstorming-reduce-er-wait-times/2013-08-19>

⁵ Ray Williams. "Why Brainstorming Doesn't Improve Productivity or Creativity." *Psychology Today*. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201204/why-brainstorming-doesnt-improve-productivity-or-creativity>

⁶ *Ibid.*

- Social loafing
- A decrease in productivity
- Inhibition among participants
- Lower quality ideas
- Anchoring
- Hothousing

Firstly, it can promote what is called **social loafing**. This is when people in the group are less likely to participate because they think others will pick up the slack. Some participants might assume the role of bystander and forgo idea sharing. This is why some claim that brainstorming can impede productivity. When someone is talking, the rest of the group has to wait, which can cause people to lose focus on their own ideas, or even forget them altogether. It also gives them time to talk themselves out of mentioning ideas that might seem redundant or silly.

Also, despite the rhetoric “that no idea is a bad one,” some participants might feel that others are judging their ideas when they state them during brainstorming sessions. And if people are scared of saying the wrong thing, they’ll end up saying nothing at all. In an article from Fast Company, Consultant Debra Kaye claims that peer pressure from the group might also result in obvious responses.⁷ The theory is that when people brainstorm alone they have more time to build an idea and think it through. As a result, group brainstorming might produce lower quality ideas than when working alone.

Brainstorming sessions can also lead to what is called anchoring. By way of an example we’ve all watched the BBC TV show ‘The Apprentice’ where newly formed groups of candidates meet to discuss their task or choose their team name and the group quickly latch on to the first, often hairbrained idea. This is anchoring. The creativity of the group can be limited when participants latch onto ideas that are shared early in the brainstorming session. When a group gets anchored on one idea or concept it prevents individuals from coming up with new ideas, which, of course, is the ultimate objective of the session.

Another risk is called **hothousing**. Although brainstorming is designed to energise the creative process, the time pressure associated with brainstorming creates a stressful state that prevents participants from thinking imaginatively and freely. For these reasons, some suggest that brainstorming be replaced by other techniques and tools.



⁷ Debra Kaye. “Why Innovation By Brainstorming Doesn’t Work.” Fast Company. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.fastcompany.com/3006322/why-innovation-brainstorming-doesnt-work>

But still, you don't need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. New techniques and technologies that facilitate a better brainstorming process are being added to this age old practice. Such as, for example, facilitator training as the role of the facilitator has been identified as one of the key factors for success. Experts also say that nowadays, space matters. Research shows that collaborative spaces really do make a difference in the productivity of a brainstorming session. Finally, the strategy that no idea is a bad one should be revisited, with experts now saying that a little healthy competition is beneficial to the process.

Plus, technology can give brainstorming a boost, especially when coupled with new tactics like blitzing, brainswarming, e-brainstorming and timeboxing. Using some or a combination of these newer techniques can make brainstorming more effective and productive.

Preparation pre-brainstorm

Before you book the meeting room and buy sticky notes, you need to prepare for effective brainstorming. This contradicts the free-flowing, organic approach to brainstorming that experts endorsed. Before you even start, it's important to take some time to really outline the problem to be solved and develop potential solutions to build upon. Setting up a brainstorming session without well-articulated problems could put you on a path to failure.

Ralph Keeney, a Professor and Consultant to the US Department of Energy, says it's essential to go through the process of analysing and focusing on objectives early on. For example, to prepare for a brainstorming session at the Department of Energy, Keeney met for one hour with 19 executives individually, including the CEO. He asked them to define objectives for the brainstorming session and compiled a list of 450 things the executives wanted to achieve. He then took these goals and narrowed them down to 40 major goals.⁸



Keeney provides another example on how to define possible objectives. While working with the design firm IDEO⁹, Keeney helped the company to identify the objectives and goals prior to the meeting. Initially, the company wanted to hold a brainstorming session to get ideas on how to build a coffee cup that could be used by cyclists. Instead of using a vague term, he helped the company narrow the goal to further develop 'spill-proof coffee cup lids' and 'bicycle cup holders.' Keeney helped to translate these ideas into a purpose statement as well. The

⁸ Susan Adams. "4 Steps to Successful Brainstorming." *Forbes*. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/03/05/4-steps-to-successful-brainstorming/>

⁹ Susan Adams. "4 Steps to Successful Brainstorming." *Forbes*. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/03/05/4-steps-to-successful-brainstorming/>

session began by asking the group how it could help bike commuters drink coffee without spilling it or burning their tongues. This level of detail can help narrow the focus and keep the groups engaged.

These examples show some of the ways you might focus your brainstorming session early on. It's really about being as clear as possible, and not letting sessions run wild, which was often the strategy used with traditional brainstorming. Using a practical example, let's say your company wants to brainstorm how to improve customer engagement. You might hone in on the topic and identify that the goal is to get more customers to 'Like' your Facebook page or to engage with you on social media. Providing this level of detail and focus will help the session be more effective. Even better, by sharing the problem and potential outcomes with participants before the brainstorming session they'll be able to develop well-defined ideas in advance. Give participants a chance to mull over the problem prior to an official meeting and you'll be one step ahead of the process.

Ready, set, brainstorm!

Now that you've done your homework and clearly outlined the objectives and problems to be addressed, you're ready to book the meeting room and invite participants. Although a lot has changed with brainstorming, you still need to adopt some of the basic and time-tested principles and set some ground rules. Even today, an effective brainstorming session:

- Gathers a group with diverse backgrounds and talents to address a problem
- Establishes the ground rules for the session
- Creates a system to capture the ideas (flip chart, whiteboard, computer software)
- Designates one member of the group as scribe, to record each idea that is put forward
- Encourages every member of the group to 'storm the problem' by contributing as wide a range of potential solutions as possible
- Reviews and amends suggestions when the flow of ideas subsides



While this list is helpful in outlining the basic tenets that still apply, brainstorming needs an infusion of modern-day elements, too - new and updated tactics can take brainstorming to the next level. Some of these new elements include revamping the role of the facilitator, selecting the right space, promoting

competition and tapping into technologies designed to improve the practice. By updating your sessions with these elements you can obtain the maximum benefits from brainstorming.

Improved facilitation - the cornerstone of brainstorming

True, good facilitation has been a key element in brainstorming for years. In general, a facilitator is the person that keeps the group on task and records ideas using a flip chart or some other method. A lot of companies simply select a volunteer to serve in this role, and this person may or may not have a stake in the outcome. And more often than not, the facilitators in brainstorming sessions have no formal training. But in today's world, experts say that a trained facilitator, rather than a volunteer, can be an important driver of success.



Consultant Bob Sutton, for instance, claims the key to effective brainstorming today is smooth facilitation.¹⁰ A good facilitator keeps the group on task and eliminates some of the risks like social loafing and inhibition.

If you have the budget, it's not a bad idea to hire an expert facilitator. At the very least, make sure your facilitator has tools at their disposal that can improve the brainstorming session. You can obtain tips on how to facilitate a brainstorming session from the website Learning for Sustainability¹¹. Another resource is the International Association of Facilitators¹² which offers a plethora of resources, including a report on Facilitation 101.¹³ You might also like to check out work by Brian Stanfield such as his article "The 14 Competencies of a Facilitator"¹⁴ which is a classic article on facilitator competencies. The point is that facilitators can't go unprepared or be chosen at the last minute if you want to get the most out of your brainstorming session.

¹⁰ Bob Sutton. "Why The New Yorker's Claim That Brainstorming Doesn't Work Is an Overstatement and Possibly Wrong." Web. 14 May 2015. http://bobsutton.typepad.com/my_weblog/2012/01/why-the-new-yorkers-claim-that-brainstorming-doesnt-work-is-an-overstatement-and-possibly-wrong.html

¹¹ "Facilitation tools & techniques." learningforsustainability.net. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://learningforsustainability.net/tools/facilitation.php>

¹² IAF. <http://www.iaf-world.org/site>

¹³ "The Art and Mastery of Facilitation - Worlds of Change." International Association of Facilitators. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://amauta-international.com/iaf2000/Ruete.PDF>

¹⁴ Brian Stanfield. "The 14 Competencies of a Facilitator." Organizing For Power, Organizing For Change. Web. 14 May 2015. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1r-rPbk0mvBZRuubMmEszVRLr-K4u_dBMdhmxKZ_Vs/edit

Space matters

Have you ever been in a brainstorming session held in a large, dimly-lit board room? If you have, then you shouldn't be surprised that a comfortable meeting environment is another critical success factor to modern brainstorming. And if you want it to work in today's world, not only should the space be comfortable, it should also be a space that is not normally used for other business related functions. An article in Entrepreneur claims that, the worst place to generate new ideas is the very place where most businesses probably congregate.¹⁵ Ideally, companies should use designated spaces that promote collaboration and free flowing ideas. Think comfy couches and open spaces designed to stimulate conversations. If you have telecommuters, Google Hangouts¹⁶ is a good place to brainstorm and it allows up to 10 people to participate in free video conferences.

Collaboration by design is a growing theme to promote fresh ideas. For instance, in the Pixar headquarters, Steve Jobs designed the office so that in order to access the building's bathrooms, employees had to walk through an atrium. The idea was that by increasing the odds that employees would cross paths, writers and programmers would discuss cross-disciplinary ideas, even during their breaks¹⁷.

In addition, Pixar and other leading-edge companies designate communal spaces specifically for innovation and brainstorming.

And it turns out that there's a science to collaboration, too. According to a study by Harvard Medical School Researcher Isaac Kohane, those that work physically near others promote better group ideas. The ideal distance is 32 feet (just under 10 metres); a study found that employees who work close to each other were more collaborative as a whole.¹⁸ The same idea applies to brainstorming. You won't be successful brainstorming in a large room that puts participants significantly apart from each other. So create a sense of teamwork by working in smaller spaces to give your brainstorming session a boost.

Actually, there are bad ideas

Traditional brainstorming theory rests on the premise that ideas should flow freely without judgement or censorship of the quality of ideas. The operating



¹⁵ Stephanie Vozza. "Forget Brainstorming, Try Brainswarming Instead." Entrepreneur. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/228171>

¹⁶ Google Hangouts. <http://www.google.com/+learnmore/hangouts/>

¹⁷ Reena Jana. "Why brainstorming doesn't work – and what does." ZD Net. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.zdnet.com/article/why-brainstorming-doesnt-work-and-what-does/>

¹⁸ Reena Jana. "Why brainstorming doesn't work – and what does." ZD Net. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.zdnet.com/article/why-brainstorming-doesnt-work-and-what-does/>

principle is that limiting criticism encourages more creative, out-of-the-box thinking. Yet, experts now suggest that a little competition and debate is not only healthy for brainstorming, but it should be encouraged in order to unearth the best ideas.

In fact, the traditional 'no criticism, every idea is worthy' rule might not be the best approach. Some claim that better ideas are generated within an environment of debate and evaluation. Dissent stimulates new ideas as it encourages participants to engage more fully with the work of others and to reassess their own viewpoints.¹⁹ It also allows team members to engage more with the ideas of others. And after facing conflicts, people often come up with more thoughts and ideas. It might not be the pretty or polite way to share ideas, but experts say it works.

Mix it up: Try blitzing and brainswarming (Yes, these are actual strategies)

If you really want to give brainstorming an update, try infusing your brainstorming session with leading-edge techniques. Some of these include **blitzing**, **brainswarming**, **e-brainstorming** and **timeboxing**. Each of these techniques can enhance the brainstorming experience, or at the very least, mix things up to keep it interesting.

Blitzing is like brainstorming on steroids. This is when participants are asked to work by themselves and come up with nine new ideas in two minutes, which they are then asked to share with the group. There is no time to filter ideas as a group, and accordingly, some say it generates more ideas than simple brainstorming.²⁰ Some of the advantages of blitzing are that:

- It includes everyone in the group
- It generates a huge number of ideas in a short time
- It keeps extroverts or senior people from dominating the conversation

Brainswarming is another tactic you might consider in lieu of traditional methods. Brainswarming is described as swarming rather than storming a problem - smaller swarms come together to work on a problem. Instead of a single session, the swarm may shift and keep working until the problem is solved. When one



¹⁹ George Dichiario. "Challenging Three Myths of Brainstorming." Research-live.com. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.research-live.com/comment/challenging-three-myths-of-brainstorming/4010286.article>

²⁰ Ken Hudson. "Instead of Brainstorming — Try Blitzing!" Web. 14 May 2015. <http://drkenhudson.com/instead-of-brainstorming-try-blitzing>

objective is met, the idea is to keep a good swarm intact to tackle the next problem. Business author Kevin Maney's eBook "The New Art of Brainstorming"²¹ is available as a free download from IdeaPaint, a company that sells paint that turns walls into white boards. By interviewing leaders from companies such as online payment processor PayPal and the New York-based strategy consultant SYPartners, Maney found that innovators continually generate new ideas through a more continuous and dynamic process.²²

Have you heard of **e-brainstorming**? This is when participants use computers to generate ideas or they use software tools that promote collaboration. Some say it can enhance the brainstorming experience by giving individuals sitting at their computers a chance to contribute to ideas independently. This way, you can reach normally quiet participants who may be inhibited sharing ideas. With e-brainstorming, a facilitator is responsible for compiling everyone's ideas and presenting them to the group for appraisal.

Although e-brainstorming is less spontaneous than face-to-face brainstorming, it still has several advantages. For one, individuals have some degree of control as to when they create their own ideas or review the ideas of others; it can enhance the creative process and increase productivity. **Anchoring**, for example, is less likely to occur when most of the creative work is done independently. And, since only the facilitator knows the identity of contributors, participants can submit ideas anonymously that they might hesitate to share in a group setting. This limits the effect of **social loafing** and inhibitions to sharing. Although e-brainstorming isn't the only method to improve brainstorming, research shows that it can overcome some of the problems encountered in the face-to-face method.

Timeboxing is used to keep a brainstorming session focused, spark creativity and build on the best ideas. The idea is to set a fixed time period, called a 'timebox' for planned brainstorming, and to pause when a certain time limit is reached to evaluate ideas and refocus. You might also use this time to reflect and summarise key ideas and points. Figure 1. shows a visual example of how timeboxing might be used in a brainstorming session. As shown, you might spend 20 minutes brainstorming big ideas and pause to flesh out some of the best ones that the group can then build upon. In the next timeboxing period, you might hone in on some of the more creative ideas. Experts find that brainstorming in intervals not only helps the group to stay focused and spark creativity, but it provides an



21 "The New Art of Brainstorming." IdeaPaint. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.ideapaint.com/landing-pages/brainstorming>

22 "IdeaPaint Unveils New eBook, The New Art of Brainstorming." Business Wire. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20130718005302/en/IdeaPaint-Unveils-eBook-Art-Brainstorming>

opportunity to build on the best ideas. Plus, using timeboxing helps to keep the group on task and reduces the likelihood of getting sidetracked.²³

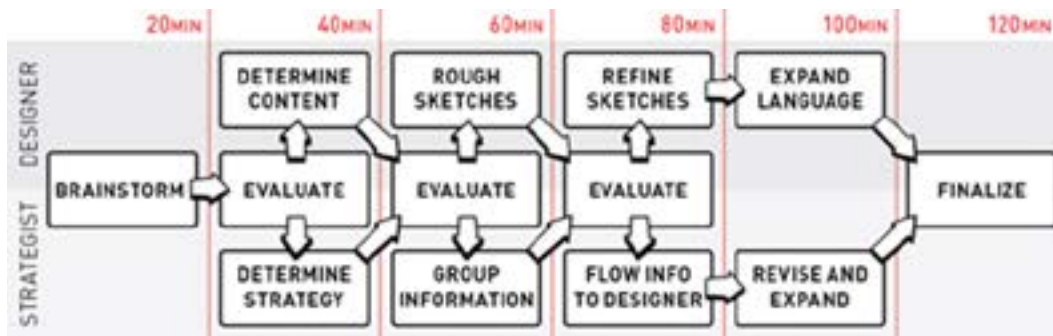


Figure 1. Timeboxing example

The evolving role of technology in brainstorming

Like many business functions, brainstorming is an activity that can get a makeover through technology. By using technology, you can organise and visualise ideas in real-time or over a specified time period. The logic is that it's much more effective to keep track of brainstorming sessions using technology rather than pen and paper. Not only can it map out resources, but it can help uncover new ideas by linking and cross referencing other ideas.

What are some of the most popular tools available to enhance brainstorming? Mashable provides a list of "24 Essential Mind Mapping and Brainstorming Tools."²⁴ Also, Scott Gerber, from The Next Web printed a similar list on the "10 Top Tools for Brainstorming."²⁵ Some of the tools that top the lists include:

- Producteev²⁶
- Mindmeister²⁷
- Coggle²⁸
- Bubbl.us²⁹
- GroupMap³⁰
- SpiderScribe³¹

²³ "Who Says Brainstorming Doesn't Work?" ZURB. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://zurb.com/article/920/who-says-brainstorming-doesn-t-work>

²⁴ "24 Essential Mind Mapping and Brainstorming Tools." MashableUK. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://mashable.com/2013/09/25/mind-mapping-tools/>

²⁵ "10 top tools for business brainstorming and collaboration." TNW News. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://thenextweb.com/apps/2012/07/14/10-top-tools-for-business-brainstorming-and-collaboration/#IzCHPT>

²⁶ Producteev. <https://www.producteev.com/>

²⁷ Mindmeister. <https://www.mindmeister.com/>

²⁸ Coggle. <https://coggle.it/>

²⁹ Bubbl.us. <https://bubbl.us/>

³⁰ GroupMap. <http://www.groupmap.com/>

³¹ SpiderScribe. <http://www.spiderscribe.net/>

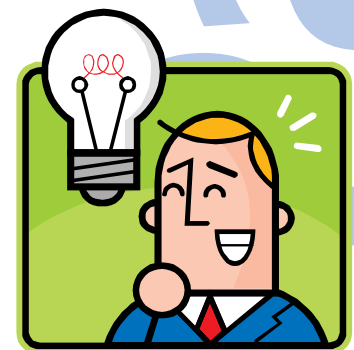
Brainstormers

Each of these tools provide different features and functions. Producteev, for example, is a cross-platform tool for collaboration. It is recommended for its ability to allow team members to collaborate on similar projects. GroupMap is recommended for use before and during brainstorming sessions, because it can help filter, sort and rank ideas in real time. Participants can even like and dislike ideas or engage in on-the-spot voting. Additionally, SpiderScribe is an online mind mapping and brainstorming tool. It helps companies to organise ideas by connecting notes, files, calendar events and more in free-form maps. These maps can be used online for additional collaboration or brainstorming.

Before selecting a tool, make sure you find one that suits your needs, since each platform offers slightly different features. And it's important to remember that technology is no substitute for the real thing, it should be only one of the tools you use to complement it. You still need to engage the right people using some of the traditional methods, like facilitation and comfortable space. In other words, technology is not a replacement for brainstorming, but it can be a way to enhance it.

Give brainstorming a facelift

It's safe to say that brainstorming will continue to be a prevalent practice across organisations of all types and sizes. So grab your thinking cap and remember, the only bad idea might be ditching the practice altogether. After all, without some sort of employee brainstorming, you might miss some of the greatest innovations from your collective employee base. And that would be a bad idea.



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