



A Place for Everything and Everything in its Place: How to Deal with Information Overload

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Like all of us, I have been overwhelmed by information in the past decade. It is hard to imagine going one day without turning on my computer, and yet I lived the first decades of my life without one. I used to keep my contacts in a section of a paper planner. Now the sheer number of contacts I need to have at my fingertips requires a computer program to manage.

Since I cannot turn back the clock, I have experimented over the years with different methods to keep track of things. Often, I would create a new Microsoft Word document, try to name it something obvious, put the information in it, and then try to place it in an obvious folder. This is not so easy with 160G of space and

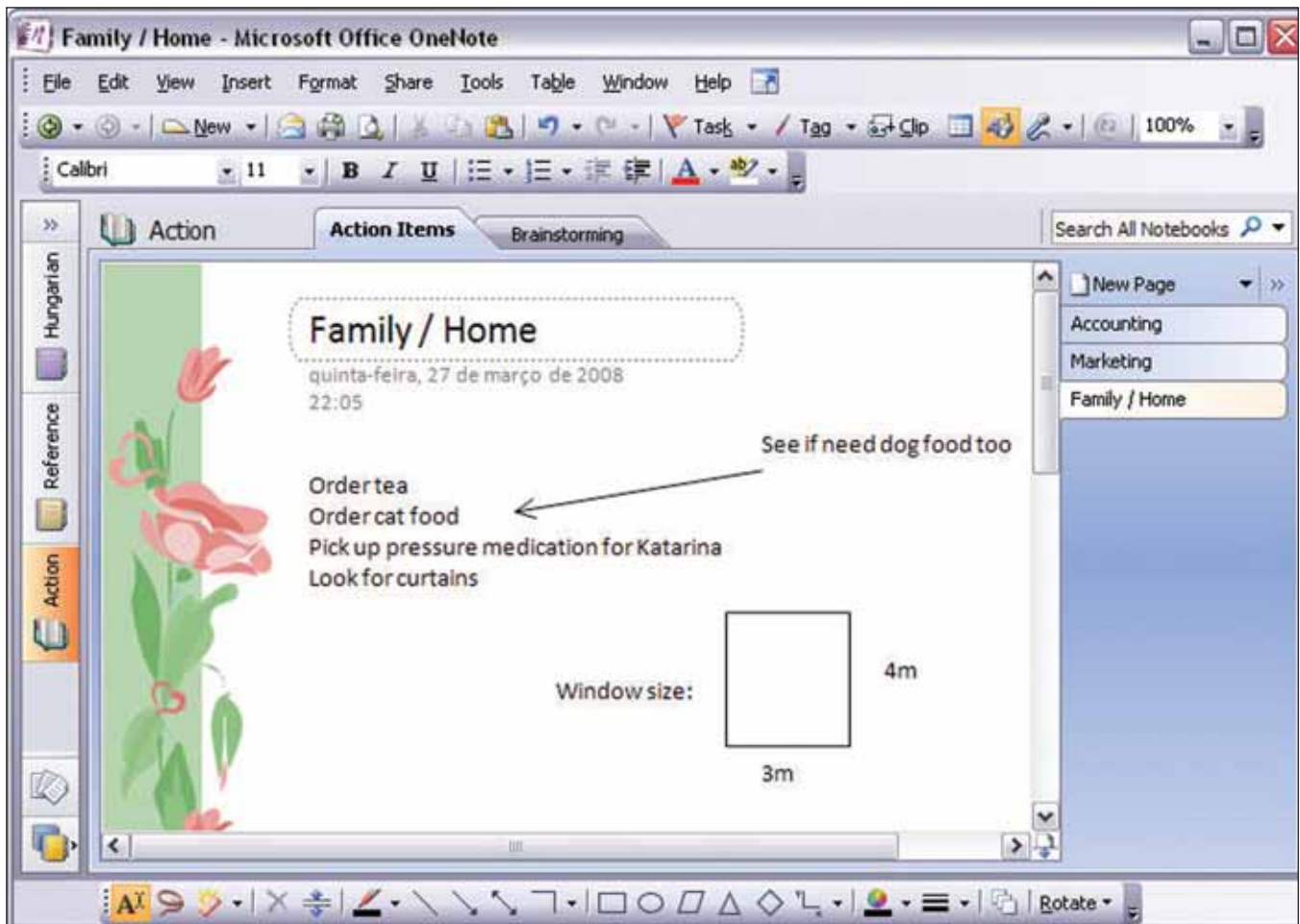
thousands of folders. To make matters worse, searching for text inside a file in Windows is ridiculously slow. Personal information management (PIM) programs like Microsoft Outlook require you to put data in a special format, or not at all, and are oriented toward calendar, to-do, and contact information. What do you do with all the other information? By this I mean:

- Jobs invoiced and paid/due;
- List of clients and potential clients, or agencies to avoid and agencies to contact;
- Bank websites, account numbers, passwords;
- Site links, user names, and pass-

words (Amazon, Yahoo! mail, etc.);

- Software license numbers;
- To-do items that are on the back burner;
- Results of brainstorming sessions;
- Meeting agendas or notes;
- Schedules (daily or long-term planning);
- Miscellaneous lists (presents, anniversaries, books);
- Research notes (translation or area-specific);
- Tax information (tax-deductible expenses, deadlines);
- Checklists (trip packing list, shopping list);
- Computer tips or instructions from manuals, articles, or technical support; and

Figure 1: Microsoft OneNote 2007 Screen



- Notes on how to do something (on the computer or otherwise).

Some people keep their information in a paper planner, on scraps of paper, Post-its, or a white board. At the opposite end of the spectrum, other people keep all their information online in

and there appears to be a relationship between how information is visualized and how well it is remembered or accessed. Last year, I began experimenting with the personal wiki concept as a way to deal with the multi-dimensionality of the information I must track. The concept can be

Wikipedia is based. As a reminder, a wiki is software that allows users to collaboratively create, edit, link, and organize the content of a website, usually for reference material. Similar to community wikis, a personal wiki is a wiki in which you put your own knowledge and notes, creating meaningful links between them. It is like having all of your notes on a personal website, but without the need to work with HTML. Wikis are not the same as PIMs like Microsoft Outlook and similar programs because they let you organize information any way you choose (within the software's limitations). You decide how to organize your information, and then access it through hierarchical trees, mind maps, or search tools (depending on the software chosen). Note that many programs that allow you to do this, including those mentioned in this article, do not call themselves personal wiki programs, but infor- ➔

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Google Calendar, Google Docs, or another program. Individuals must use what works best for them, which is why this article mentions several software products with different approaches for managing information.

I have always been fascinated by how the brain works when it is learning and organizing information,

implemented in a variety of ways, but the basic idea is to be able to create notes on separate pages and link them in a way that is meaningful for you. Search capabilities are essential, since it can be hard to remember where you put things months or years later.

Almost all readers will be familiar with the wiki concept on which

mation managers, note takers, and mind-mapping programs, among others.

Microsoft OneNote 2007

Microsoft OneNote 2007 is a personal wiki solution that allows you to create links to files, Web pages, and other OneNote pages, and insert, for example, images, audio, video, and digital handwriting. The screen shown in Figure 1 on page 35 is my Family/Home page in the Action Items section of the Action notebook.

At first glance, Figure 1 looks like Microsoft Word with three levels of tabs. Notebooks, shown along the left side of the screen, contain Sections, shown along the top of the editing area, which contain pages, shown along the right side. Sub-sections and

sub-pages can also be created for additional levels of complexity. The editing area, however, is more like a whiteboard or bulletin board than Microsoft Word. You can put text anywhere on the screen. Using the drawing tools shown at the bottom of the screen in Figure 1, you can draw various shapes and figures. Images can be inserted either as floating objects or as a fixed background. It is very easy to learn because the menus and tools work like those in other Microsoft Office products.

One of my favorite features is the ability to use decorative backgrounds. The hearts and flowers background shown in Figure 1 is one of about 50 that come with the program, and you can make templates yourself with your own images and text. Plain white

just gets boring sometimes.

The notebooks shown in Figure 1 were created based on the principles of the book *Getting Things Done* (see the references at the end of this article), according to which reference material and action items should be organized separately so that you can see at a glance what your priorities are at any given time. I also like to have pages in the reference section for brainstorming, where I can write down whatever comes to mind without worrying about where to put it until later (like electronic scrap paper). I also have a page with links to the files I use most, so I can access them through OneNote rather than through menus or the Windows directory structure. I keep OneNote open on my PC all day.

Table 1: Other Personal Wiki Programs

Program	Features	Cost	Accessibility / Portability	Operating System
Compendium 1.5.2	Text and links. Visual mapping interface.	Free	Allows sharing and collaboration online.	Windows / Mac / Linux
EverNote 2.2	Text and links. Imports files as images. Works with handwritten text.	\$50, 60-day free trial	EverNote Portable runs directly off a Universal Serial Bus (USB) drive. A new version (currently in beta) will have integrated PC, mobile phone, and Web modules.	Windows/Mac
Microsoft OneNote 2007	Text, handwriting, images. Links to video, audio, files, the Internet. Can share/synch between PCs.	\$100, 60-day free trial. Available in some Microsoft Office suites.	Notebooks can be shared on a server, and can be synchronized between computers. Pages can be exported as non-editable Web pages or as images, or converted into Microsoft Word format.	Windows
MindManager	Mind maps, text, and links. Can create Microsoft Outlook tasks and appointments.	Pro 7: \$349; Lite 7 : \$99; Mac 7: \$129, 20-day free trial	Maps can be exported and shared, but can only be edited from within the program.	Windows / Mac
Zim	Text and links only. Very easy to use, and files are stored as simple text.	Free	Since files are in text format, they are easily portable, but this must be done manually.	Linux / Windows (if you install Perl, Gtk+)

Some other OneNote features include:

- Sharing notes with other people and synching with other computers.
- Searching for words in images (using optical character recognition).
- Searching in all notebooks with one interface.
- Creating Microsoft Outlook tasks from OneNote. (When a task is marked as complete in Outlook, it is marked as complete in OneNote, too.)
- Creating passwords for specific pages.
- Opening the program with Windows Key + Shift + N.
- Having a storage structure (folders and files, not a database) that is easy to back up and restore.
- Marking pages and text with tags, like in blogs.

Other Programs

OneNote is just one of many personal wiki programs. For an overview, see the Wikipedia personal wiki page (see references). I took a look at some other interesting programs, which are listed in Table 1 on page 36.

Some of the information management systems listed in Table 1 are more limited in the kinds of information they can incorporate, but may work better on your system or be less expensive. Some, like MindManager and Compendium, are more visual, while OneNote, EverNote, and Zim are more linear.

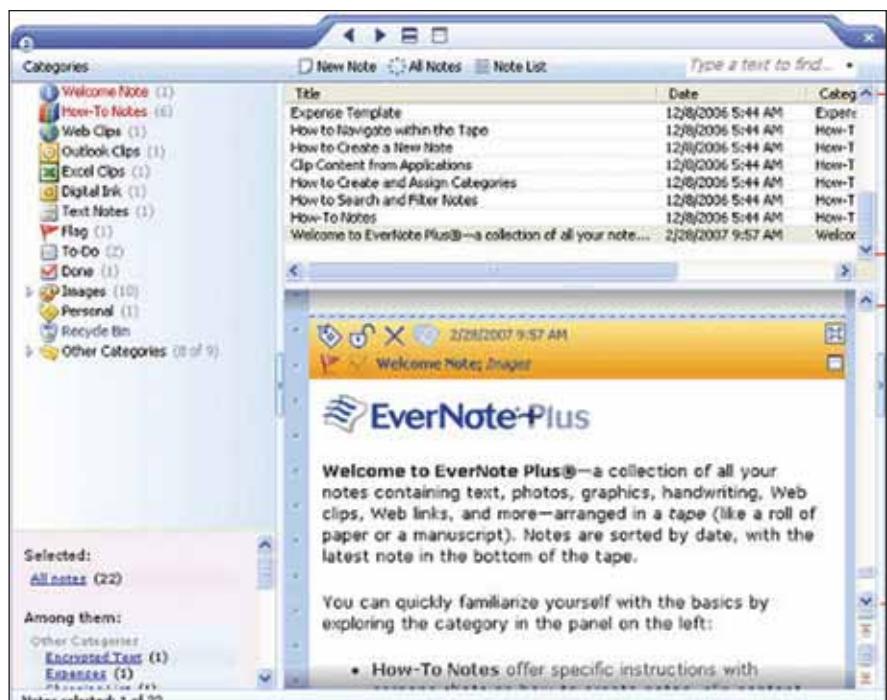
Zim

Zim is the simplest program, and was written to run on Linux. It can also run on Windows if you install Perl and Gtk+. If you have no idea what I am talking about, and you have Windows, you should probably try another tool. Otherwise, the Zim site explains how to install these programming pack- ➡

Figure 2: Zim Screen



Figure 3: EverNote 2.2 Screenshot



ages. Zim is easy to use and may be all you need if you do not want to work with diagrams or images. It stores files in text format, so they can be easily read outside of Zim and shared between different computers or devices. You can use it to link to files of any type. (See Figure 2 on page 37 for an example.)

EverNote

EverNote is oriented toward Tablet PCs and handwriting, and is very strong at working with images. Searches include handwritten words

and words in images, which OneNote also does. Notes are organized internally by date, and can be tagged or labeled with multiple categories. (See Figure 3 on page 37 for an example.) The new version, currently available in beta, has integrated online, mobile phone, and PC/Mac versions so you can search your notes taken at home from your mobile phone or online. Images captured on your mobile phone or notes you take while away from the computer are added to your overall set of notes.

Compendium and MindManager

Compendium and MindManager have a visual approach to organizing information and relationships. The drawback is that you are forced to put things in a visual format, and cannot just draw or type freestyle like on a whiteboard, as OneNote allows you to do. These programs work on the top-down principle, where you begin with general concepts and work down to the details. Compendium is slightly more difficult to use than MindManager, but it has extensive

Figure 4: MindManager Screenshot

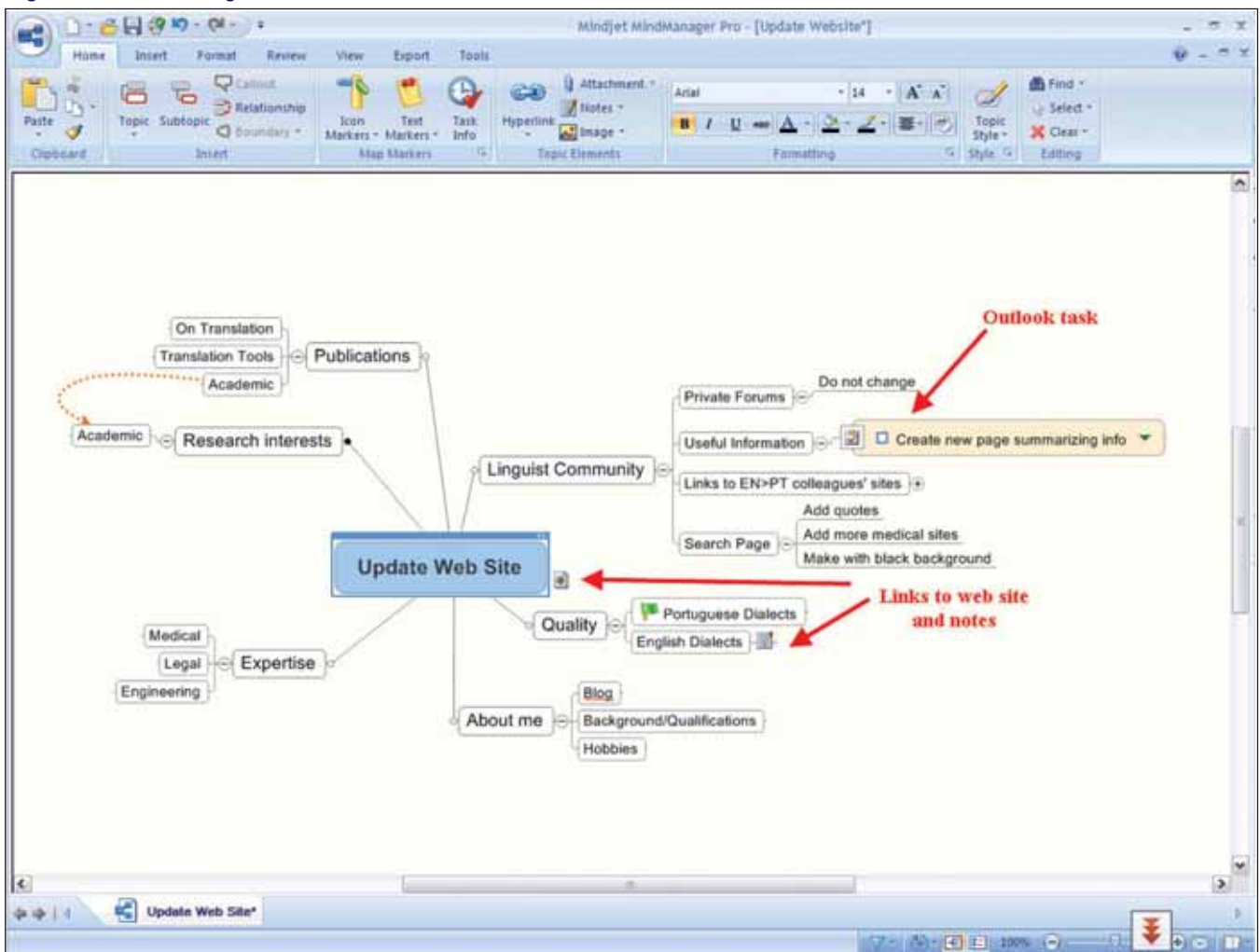
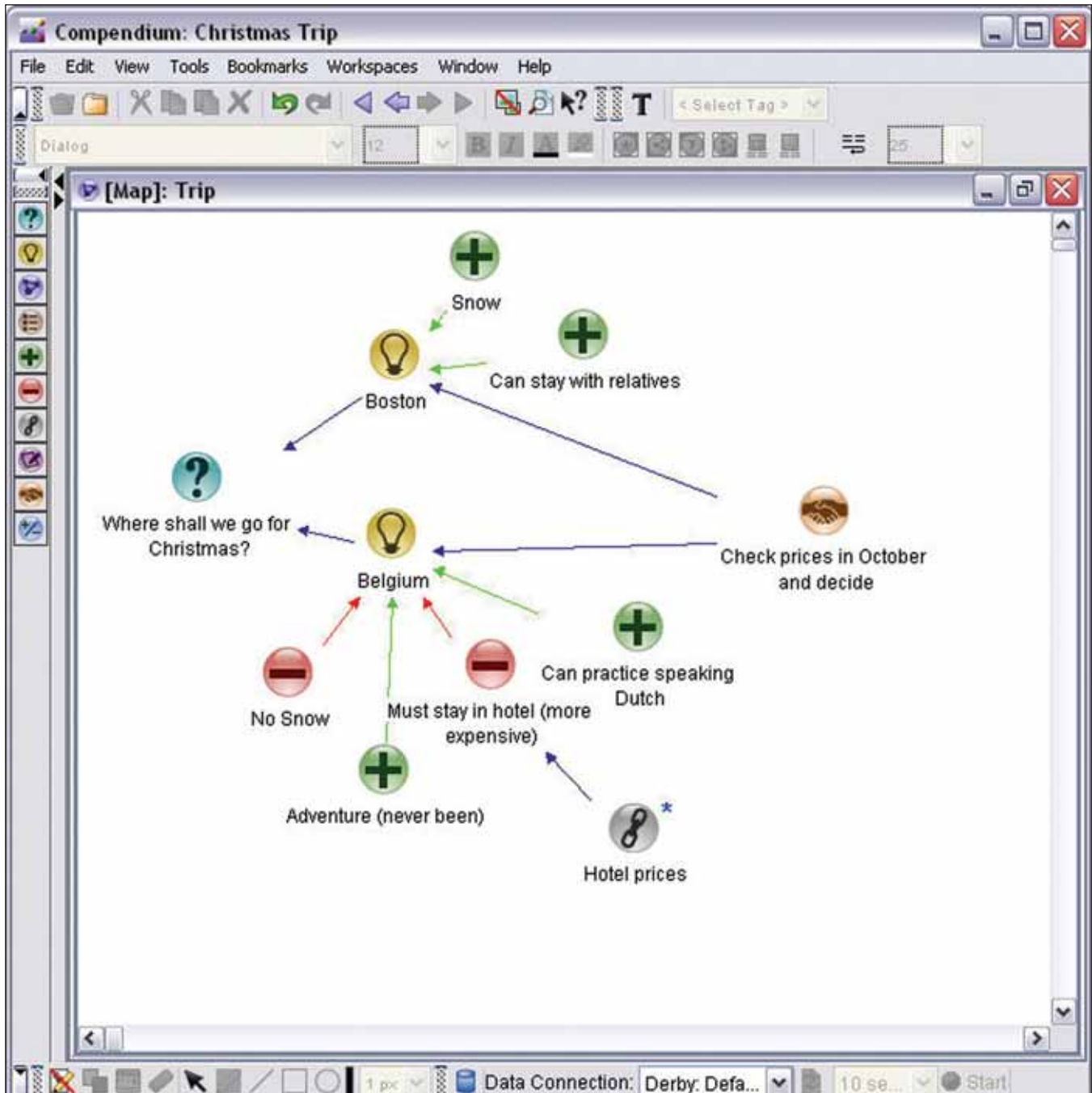


Figure 5: Compendium Screenshot



documentation, and it is free! (See Figure 4 on page 38 for a MindManager screenshot showing a map of tasks for updating a website.) Like OneNote, MindManager is integrated with Microsoft Outlook, and Outlook tasks and appointments can be created from within the tool. You can take notes within the program, attaching them to a topic in a mind map, and you can create links to Web pages, documents, or other mind

maps. The program can also automatically convert maps into Outline form and vice-versa.

Figure 5 shows a screenshot of Compendium detailing plans for a Christmas trip. I think visual maps are better for planning, organizing, and brainstorming, but I would not want to be forced to put all of my notes in this format. I prefer to create maps in map programs, and then import them into a tool like OneNote or EverNote.

What I Use

Now you are probably wondering what I use, since no one would use all the programs discussed here. I use Microsoft Outlook for e-mail and contacts because it synchronizes with my smartphone. I hate Outlook, but I have no desire to insert all of my contacts into my mobile phone manually. PocoMail is a much better program, and that is what I use for my personal mail accounts. I have a paper ➡

planner for keeping track of appointments, and use only the month-at-a-glance pages. I have few appointments, and I carry the paper planner with me. I also put my basic schedule into Google Calendar, which I share with my husband, so we each know where the other person is during the day and who needs to take the car/subway on a given day.

I have blank pages in my paper planner that I use to write down anything I think of while I am away from the office or when the computer is turned off. When the computer is on, I transfer this information to the appro-

priate location. I use TO3000 for keeping track of clients, jobs, invoices, and payments. I use OneNote for everything else. My husband uses Zim (instead of OneNote)

on the Linux OS, and is very happy with it. I draw mind maps and other graphics using Inspiration, and then import them into OneNote.

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References

Personal Wiki Tools

Compendium

<http://compendium.open.ac.uk/institute/index.htm>

EverNote

<http://evernote.com>

Microsoft OneNote 2007

office.microsoft.com/onenote

MindManager

www.mindjet.com/us

Wikipedia Personal Wiki Page

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_wiki

Zim

<http://pardus-larus.student.utwente.nl/~pardus/projects/zim/index.shtml>

Other References

Getting Things Done

www.davidco.com

Inspiration

www.inspiration.com

PocoMail

www.pocomail.com

TO3000

www.to3000.com