

Interview with Michael Hollauf on DoesWhat¹

How would you describe MindMeister in under 50 words?

MindMeister is a great way to boost productivity and help you become more organized, more creative, and more successful. You can create and share mind maps using an intuitive web interface or mobile apps. It's very useful to create personal task lists, plan your next vacation, brainstorm a new business idea, or structure an upcoming project.

Who uses MindMeister?

Currently about 1.5 million users around the world – mostly individuals and small businesses, and lately more and more schools and universities. The majority of our users come from North America and Europe and we also have a large user base in the Far East.

I think this is because mind mapping is very popular in parts of Asia, for example in Japan it is even taught in school as part of the standard curriculum. Our business users span all industries, since mind mapping can be used by anyone who needs to structure their ideas, collaborate with others, and generally be creative.

What's your background? What made you decide to start working on MindMeister?

I'm a techie at heart, and so is Till, the other co-founder of MindMeister. This helped us a lot in creating a great product, but was also a challenge on the business side of things, at least initially. We worked together at another tech company when we got the idea to start our own business. Google had just acquired a company called Writely and turned their product into what is now Google Docs, which we started using almost immediately to collaborate on projects at work.

We were also using MindManager, at the time the only serious mind mapping software, to brainstorm product ideas and also to conduct and organize customer meetings.

MindManager was a standard OS-dependent program that had to be installed locally and licensed for about \$300, which made it very hard to share our mind maps with anybody else, as they would have had to buy the software as well. Also, you couldn't collaborate at all, which is something quite important for a brainstorming tool.

¹ <http://doeswhat.com/2012/07/26/interview-with-michael-hollauf-mindmeister/>

So, while using Google Docs – a collaborative word processing tool – and MindManager – a non-collaborative brainstorming tool – at the same time, we thought it might be a good idea to combine the two.

Some of your tools look great, particularly the Geistesblitz Widget. How did you come up with this?

Thanks! Geistesblitz was one of our first add-on tools and it really seemed a natural thing to let people insert ideas quickly into a mind map without having to go through a web browser or having to log in etc. Also, at that time the idea of widgets was taking off, so we built one for Mac OS X, Windows Vista, Yahoo! Widgets, and even Google and netvibes. Regarding the name Geistesblitz, we had that German/English thing going on already with the MindMeister name, so we looked at other German words that existed in English and Geistesblitz seemed to fit perfectly.

What roles did you and co-founder, Till Vollmer undertake in the beginning? Have they changed much?

From the start we were both pretty much hardcore programmers. Because Till knew more about these things, he took on the role of system admin and back-end guy, while I focused on user interface and client-side code right away. We were lucky to know a great designer from our previous job who has been responsible for the MindMeister user interface since. These days most of our time goes into running the business as such. I do a lot of marketing – such as this interview – and Till is responsible for sales & business development. We really miss the coding, though, so a few years back we started to organize regular so-called Hackfests, where about once a year all the R&D staff goes to some resort in the mountains and just codes pretty much non-stop for three or four days. A lot of our new features come out of these hackfests. And, of course, Till and I go along as well.

How easy was it to patent your History View, a feature that allows users to playback the entire evolution of their mind map?

Quite hard, actually. We started by submitting a provisional patent where you have to describe your innovation in the minutest detail and create multiple architecture diagrams and UI mockups. This took over one year and once that was over we submitted the patent with the help of a patent lawyer. We've been waiting on the actual final approval since. Software patents can only be issued in the US anyway, as European law doesn't protect intellectual property in software.

How did you come up with the name, MindMeister?

Through lots and lots of beermat scribbles, whois searches and weeding out of really bad suggestions. I have a presentation about the story of MindMeister that has two slides dedicated only to the name finding process. We wanted something unique and memorable, innovative if possible, and of course with an available .com domain. The first prototype was still called mindmob, and we even designed a logo for that. I remember that the last discarded suggestion (that then led to MindMeister) was "uberidea".

What technology are you running MindMeister on?

Ruby on Rails on the backend (with MySQL and Apache), and just pure HTML / CSS / JavaScript on the frontend. We're using many open source libraries such as prototype and scriptaculous, raphael, and lots of really cool Rails gems, so a sincere thanks again to all the folks creating these tools!

When we first created MindMeister we wanted to see if it could be done using only standard web technologies. We never liked Flash or ActiveX, and were lucky that the majority of the web community felt the same way and drove the development of HTML5 and CSS3 ahead. They've come a very long way since we started and these days you can do almost everything you can do in Flash also in HTML5, all without the risk of overheating your CPU.

What was technically the most challenging part of developing MindMeister?

Probably dealing with the sheer amount of data. We have about 500 million ideas in the database now, and the "changes" table, which tracks each tiny modification on an idea, is much larger even. Querying these tables in a fashion that still performs reasonably well isn't easy. I'm sure the sysadmins at Twitter or Facebook would laugh at us, though.

The second most challenging part was dealing with browser specifics, and there above all Internet Explorer. I can safely say that IE 6 and 7 cost us at least \$100,000 in development costs, just because of the extra time we had to spend getting MindMeister to run on them. The web development process used to look like this – you spend 6 weeks implementing a new feature for Firefox, Chrome, Safari, and Opera, then add another 6 weeks for Internet Explorer alone. Ok, that might be a small exaggeration, but I'm not far off. I recently read that an Australian online retailer started adding a 7% Internet Explorer 7 tax to the checkout bill if you're using that browser to purchase goods at their site, to cover the additional development costs. What a great idea.

How long did it take to put together MindMeister?

The first version took only about 10 months to release. We started toying around with drawing some nodes on a canvas in mid 2006, and the private beta started in February 2007. It included all the basic features, even real-time collaboration, but obviously nothing fancy such as attachments or images. We've tried to keep fast release cycles up, however because of the multitude of browsers and other clients, such as iOS and Android apps, things take much longer now.

Do you have any new features in the pipeline?

Lots of them. Coming soon are labels for connections, floating nodes, a new and pretty cool presentation mode that will rival the likes of Prezi – or so we hope at least – and a completely rewritten Android app for tablets. We're also working on the next MeisterLabs product, which will of course integrate nicely with MindMeister and give our users another great and easy-to-use productivity tool.

Has MindMeister got the feedback and growth you expected since launch?

Yes, definitely. It's been a very interesting journey. When we first launched the private beta, we were really surprised by the public reception and the amount of positive feedback we received. It seems the market was really waiting for something like MindMeister. We started by inviting about 150 people we knew, and gave them each 10 more invites for their friends and colleagues. After a few hours we were up to 1000 users and had made it to the top of del.icio.us. The public launch a few months later brought another great boost. Since then of

course there have been ups and downs, but we really are very happy with how things went and are very proud of the company we've built. No IPO on the horizon, though...

Where do you see MindMeister in 5 years time?

I'd hope that the company is at least twice the size of what it is now, which would mean we'd have about 35-40 people working on a small suite of productivity apps. I don't want the core team to be much larger than that because I still like to work with external resources for some things, and because I think that a larger team requires a lot of additional administration and management layers that just eat up time and money, without adding to productivity. I'm amazed at what our few talented developers can do in terms of features and I believe a healthy level of resource scarcity forces you to focus more on what you develop. If we had 20 people developing the MindMeister core product alone, there's a real danger that it might turn into some kind of unusable feature beast. Also the company culture suffers if there's too many people. Right now we can still all go to lunch together in the Vienna office (at least if we reserve a large enough table in advance).

In terms of the 5 year vision, we'll definitely also consider other options than "going it alone", but only if we find a good partner that we feel can add to the company and our vision.

Who would you say is your biggest competitor?

Probably still Mindjet with their MindManager product. They've been around the longest and they have a very feature-rich tool, so they've amassed a lot of users. Their background is different to ours though, and they focus much more on feature depth than on usability, so where we try to provide a very simple and easy-to-use product for everyone, they target the mind mapping pros who don't mind heavy toolbars and lots of customization settings.

What is the biggest hurdle you have faced or are still facing?

While we have a brilliant team here at MeisterLabs, it has been far from easy to put it together. We're currently trying to hire new staff which is proving difficult at best. One of the positions we have open is for web developers, and the job site that we posted on has 23 pages full of listings for such positions. No wonder we don't receive too many interesting

applications. We used to run our own outsourcing company some years ago and might have to look into that again if the situation doesn't improve.

What one piece of advice would you give to startup founders?

KISS – keep it simple, stupid. Above everything else, focus on usability and simplicity. If the user experience is good, and you're also solving a problem for somebody along the way, you can almost do no wrong. This has been the key to MindMeister's success so far, and we still look at every new feature or idea by first asking "does it make MindMeister more complex"? If the answer is yes, we don't do it. When you're just starting out, also make sure that your business can be described in a very simple way so that people will understand it. What are you most excited about at the moment?

Professionally, our upcoming new product, plus of course some of the new features in MindMeister. I think our new presentation mode is turning out very nicely and I can't wait to see user reaction to it.

Can you convince the reader to start using MindMeister in under 50 words?

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by all the tasks and projects in your life and don't know what to do next? Then you should try mapping it all out on MindMeister – it will take less than 10 minutes of your life, the clouds will fade away and the path ahead will become crystal clear. Try it now for free!