

# The Power of Webbing

## Revealing Assumptions to Solve the Problem a Different Way

By Hector Ramos & Dr Uwe H Kaufmann

If you want to clarify or explore a task, find root causes of a problem or develop your **strategic thinking skills** you may want to consider the queen of exploration tools: WEBBING.

One of the ways to remember this tool is by looking at Spiderman. Like Spiderman you can use the tool to move from building to building (question to question) having always a different perspective of the world (task). Why would you do that? You may want to better understand why things are the way they are. Or even look for what is the point of leverage for your future actions. Remember that every building (question) has insights (assumptions and details) that can help you understand your task more clearly – sometimes more objectively – and reach your target faster and with less effort. You need to become an **in-depth inquisitive person** (also called strategic thinker, innovator and coach) so as to assess questions by their value.

Basically this Spiderman-like behaviour is involved in three types of actions:

- 1) One type is related to space (position-perspective). By asking “Why?” and “What is stopping you?” he can move from a given position to greater abstraction (more of a visionary, motivating angle) or to a specific position (more a tactical angle).
- 2) Another type one related to time. Timing is always a factor. Where does all the motivation, vision come from? What are the past causes? When did they happen? And what has and is stopping us from moving into our desired future? And by when?
- 3) Finally there is a combination of both in the WEB. It is called movement. Movement goes in **two basic directions**:
  - a) **Depth**: By asking the question “Why?” many times over new question statements proceeding from the starting challenge we move in greater analysis of the task and underlying assumptions.
  - b) **Breadth**: By asking the question “Why” and “Why else” we see the task under a different light.

## The Case

We were called to a client to prepare the launch of their Process Excellence Programme. One of the project proposals we have been looking at was putting the solution upfront being “Automation of the XYZ application process to increase customer satisfaction”. Obviously, everyone, including project leader, sponsor, head of department and even CEO were quite sure that this was the way to go. Since having the solution stated that clearly, we could not expect creative and open-minded teamwork that could apparently lead to a different solution. Hence, we decided to “Web” the task and shed some light on the background behind the project definition (Figure 1).

After putting the question “How might we automate our process?” in the middle of the Web (in the middle of Figure 1) and asking “Why” and “Why else” often enough we easily discovered the driving forces behind this task as “Long response time to customer”, “Low customer satisfaction”, “Many processing errors” and “High staff workload” (upper part in Figure 1). After stating the obvious, we moved into a more interesting discussion by asking the question “What is stopping you?” to reveal potential blocking stones and associated assumptions at a much more detailed level (lower part in Figure 1).

Forcing people to think in this direction made clear that we had not done our preparation for the project yet: Besides the question about the approval for the investment we struggled to answer questions around resources as well as change management and – most important – the pressing need and the benefits of the investment. Going one step deeper we could not even say whether there are alternative approaches because we did not have a clear picture of weaknesses in the process. This way the web for the “Automation Solution” was mapped (burgundy area in Figure 1).

Starting again from top to bottom and asking the “Why else?” question often enough, the web changed to an alternative task that is “Increase Efficiency” driving nearly the same outcome Automation was supposed to drive. In the Web this “Hot Spot” can be easily identified by many incoming and outgoing arrows.

Additionally, it became apparent that focussing on the task “Increase Efficiency” we could not only improve our process but also gather enough data and information (red arrows in Figure 1) to support the “Automation Idea” in a second phase.

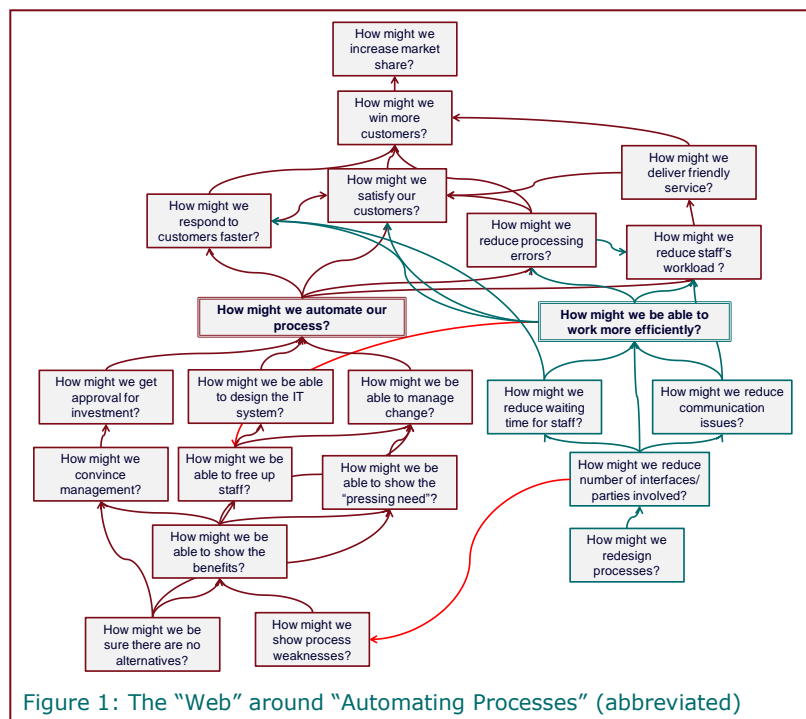


Figure 1: The “Web” around “Automating Processes” (abbreviated)

Going through this simple exercise enforced revealing assumptions and details behind the original task and resulted in change of the latter. The project title was “opened up” from stating the solution towards requesting information and analysing root causes with an open mind. Only then, the best solution will evolve.

## The Method

Creative thinking tools can be used individually (you can explore your challenge yourself), in pairs (good for coaching, counselling) and IN GROUPS. You can mix all these approaches as you want. Participants can use it individually or in pairs before they come in a group (or start in a group and then proceed to refine it individually before coming together in a group again). What are the benefits of doing this?

- 1) **Contextual Thinking.** As you work in a group people will come up with different questions. This is because they see reality differently. Webbing will provide a common platform to see reality more holistically. As the group stretches **together** you will

find the inquisitive power increased: you start producing insightful questions (especially if you have people with different thinking skills in the group: analytical, creative, detailed or implementers). Needless to say, this will help people to understand better each others' perspectives, enhance team building as well as group cohesion and synergy.

- 2) **Break-Through Meaning/Insight Search.** As webbing is being used by a skilful facilitator two things will happen:
  - a) **Abstract Words** that mean different things to people will come up. These words should be defined, explored and agreed upon, especially if they are critical for the ideation process because they provide the most important information for focused thinking.
  - b) **Opinions, Assumptions, Conclusions** and many other non-factual items will come up as well. Using the ladder of abstraction the facilitator may want to clarify with the group in order to look into the data more closely - always asking, "What is the other data that we are missing?"
  - c) **Innovative Areas** and highly efficient ways to solve problems will come up by facilitating this tool. Some of the most promising areas companies miss out because of not turning their current challenges into innovative opportunities to deliver higher value. Webbing provides the connection between both.

## Conclusion

Webbing is a powerful exploration tool that can and should be used in situations where there is some slight doubt about what is stated. It can help to open people's mind to think outside the obvious thread of thought. The method works both ways, to uncover the consequences as well as the root causes of actions. Applied in a group by a skilful facilitator, this tool can help exploring tasks and conclusions to support – and question – decisions. And, it always helps to realign project teams.

## About the Authors

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