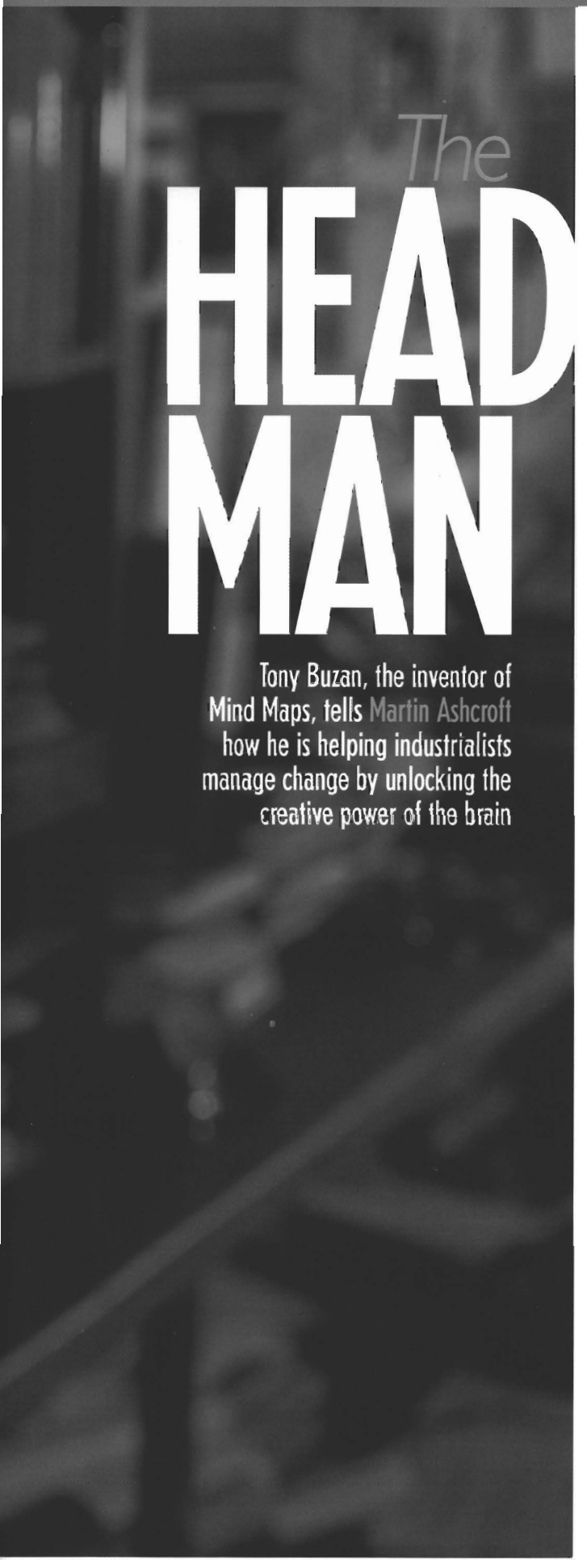

The HEAD MAN

Tony Buzan, the inventor of Mind Maps, tells Martin Ashcroft how he is helping industrialists manage change by unlocking the creative power of the brain

Mankind maps its history through a linear progression of ages; the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and more recently, the Industrial Age and the Information Age. When something new happens, we draw a line and start a new age. In this kind of context, it's easy to think that one age has to end before another begins. But Tony Buzan takes issue with linear thinking, in more ways than one. It's the wrong tool for the demands of our constantly changing modern world, he believes. The arrival of the Information Age, he asserts, is but a new aspect of the existing Industrial Age. We need a new model to cope with the challenges that face us today.

"Industry has been thought of in recent times as sheer production manufacturing and not so creative as the computer side/service side," he began. "If you look at the history of industry, though, it is the product of geniuses, having superb ideas for major innovations to help human beings live a more productive, easier, more convenient, successful life. Industry is a hotbed of creativity." Buzan's stance is that the pace of change dictates that Ages the historians might be tempted to separate, are in fact, overlapping. "We are still in the Industrial Age," he explains. "We are also in an Information Age, a Knowledge and Management Age; we are in an age of the brain. All these titles are being given to the 21st century. My point to industry is it's still in an Industrial Age and it will always be in an Industrial Age. Industry isn't something that is going to die out."

Tony Buzan is the inventor of Mind Maps, a graphic thought-organisation process which has become widely heralded as the 'Swiss army knife of the brain'. His first book, Use Your Head, was published over 25 years ago and has sold over a million copies. Since then there has been a succession of mind- and memory-improvement books. His work with industry is conducted through The Buzan Centres of learning, an international network which offers unique training courses designed to turn companies into thinking and learning organisations. Among the many concepts taught include some which have become the latest buzzwords, knowledge management and change management.

The current focus on change management is necessary, he argues, because the world is changing faster than ever, and the tools we have to deal with change are inadequate. New technology has transformed the way we live and work and play, so we have to transform the way we think. "What we do is bring the latest 'brain technology' into industry," he explains. "We help them specifically to use the mental and often physical tools that are now available, to help people at all levels of a company learn how to handle change, learn how to handle information, learn how to handle creative thinking and innovation, because industry of all sectors requires a constant updating of the product. Whether it be a car, or a sewing machine or a vacuum cleaner or a spoon, it requires that ▶

particular company to focus on maintaining its position in the marketplace. What we discuss with them is looking at the term industry in a wider perspective, because industry is creativity."

Buzan is an original thinker, and original thinking can be challenging. Yet he combines a new way of looking at things with a style of delivery that makes everything seem simple. He points out something you haven't noticed before and makes it seem obvious. He mocks the limitations of conventional thinking, not with contempt, but with humour. His observation on the modern boardroom as a place of creativity is both comical and illuminating. "Go into a boardroom and observe what is on the table," he says. "There is generally a lined pad of paper, a single cheap black biro, some water and some sugar sweets. Now the boardroom is where the top brains in the industry come together to discuss, organise, simulate, exchange, create, plan and solve problems. The room where every major issue that needs to be dealt with in that industry is discussed. To give a massive bio-computer like a brain a thinking tool of a cheap black pen and lined paper is like giving an astronaut a broomstick and saying, 'get to the moon'."

When Buzan talks about tools for creative thinking, he means more than coloured pens, although they are a prominent feature of his desk and his work. But there are mental as well as physical tools. "If you buy a piece of equipment," he points out, "you get an operations manual which tells you how it's constructed, where the parts are, how to use it, how to connect to other instruments, and who to contact if something goes wrong. Now we come onto the planet with most amazing computer imaginable, your human brain, and where's the operations manual? We at the Buzan Group

"Creative thinkers don't take linear notes. They take messy notes"

are offering that operations manual for the prime operative.

"Our objective in industry is to give people tools that help their industry grow, help it to change and nurture leaders within it," he continues. "They asked for it, which is why change management has become such a massive mantra. They realise that if they don't change, they die.

"Every single brain is a huge chamber of creativity, and all that it needs are the tools with which that creativity can be released," Buzan goes on. One of those tools is the Mind Map. A favourite example he uses to introduce the concept is its contrast with linear note taking, of the kind that most of us learned at school, continued through university and which we now practise in meetings. We do it in straight lines to be tidy, and with the ubiquitous black biro. "But monochrome is monotonous," says Buzan, "and when the brain is bored it turns off. It does not focus on the innovation or the problem, it does not know how to plan. Creative thinkers don't take linear notes. They take messy notes. The brain has linkages, maps and networks. The minute you realise that and start to reflect your thinking in a map form, suddenly your brain starts to see new connections. The minute you start to see new connections you are involved in a creative explosion. Creativity is the ability to see connections with images. Industry has got to learn to do that."

An early influence of Buzan's was the great inventor and industrialist Thomas Edison, to whose methods Mind Mapping bears more than a passing resemblance. "Edison said there is no problem that our brain can't solve. All we have to do is learn how to think. He used to have tables with totally different things being developed and he found that table Z suddenly linked in his mind with table C and he'd have a new idea. To me industry is in a very healthy situation in that it is becoming self-aware and self-directed, and that's all you need."

What the Mind Map does, he explains, is to take a central idea and build a map around it. You might take the annual plan, or R&D, or marketing or product development. Then you build up the networks around that central focus. "The Mind Map helps you put outside your head what is inside it," he says, "and you get a grasp of the whole picture, which is so crucial today with so much coming in. People are only seeing the trees, they're not seeing the wood in which these things are happening. The Mind Map is a natural reflection of the way the mind thinks."

Buzan has more telling observations on learning to think, drawing comparisons between how young children do it naturally, how the education system teaches us and how we struggle to think creatively as adults. He quoted a study completed recently which analysed the behaviours and thinking tools observed in people who were given problems to solve. "Very young children use 98 per cent of all thinking tools. By the time they're 12 they use about 75 per cent. By the time they're teenagers they're down to 50 per cent, by the time they're in university it's less than 25 per cent - less than 15 per cent by the time they're in industry." The problem is simple, he says. We are taught what to think, before we are taught how to think.

Another traditional concept that Buzan challenges is time management, for the same reason that he questions linear note taking. Traditional time management strikes him as linear, too. "My point is that time doesn't need managing," he says. "It's been managing itself forever, quite comfortably, without our interference. To think of it as time management throws you slightly off balance, so we take people through the tools for managing themselves in time." It may sound like a semantic distinction at first, but think about it and it becomes as clear an example as you could have of the importance of understanding a problem before you attempt to solve it. Once you put the emphasis on what has to be managed, ie, yourself, you approach the issue with an entirely different attitude. And that, without doubt, is what's needed right now.