Business Without Busyness

by Mimi Hall

The principles of kanban can focus our work, increase our efficiency, and boost our output—at work and at home.

Multitasking is a myth. Research cited by *Scientific American* shows that working on two tasks at once diminishes productivity and the likelihood of accomplishing both. However, our senses are constantly bombarded with stimuli. Numerous distractions constantly vie for our attention. The reality is that context switching between all the activities that fill our lives costs us time and personal fulfillment. We think we're busy, but we aren't actually finishing anything.

Japanese principles of kanban, initially used in the Toyota Production System and traditionally applied to manufacturing processes, can help address the effect of these distractions and improve productivity for individuals and teams.

NO. 1	NO. 2	NO. 3	NO. 4	NO. 5	NO. 6
Make work visible	**Limit work in process**	**Measure and manage flow**	**Make process policies explicit**	**Develop feedback loops**	**Improve collaboratively and evolve experimentally using models**
Once the task is defined and the work begun, create a *kanban,* or signal card, to visualize the active work.	Define work in process (WIP) limits for each resource and each type of task; make these tasks, in the form of signal "cards" or stickies, visible on the kanban board or wall.	Measure task cycle time *(the total time from the beginning to the end of your process)* and throughput *(the amount of work or material that goes through the process)* to prove productivity and assist in planning. A team's workflow should be like a water hose, free of kinks and smooth, throughout the entire process. If possible, have flexible resources available to move among process steps and alleviate bottlenecks.	Team members should buy into all aspects of a team-working agreement; ideally, they should contribute to or create the process policies. Just as WIP limits are defined, acceptance criteria, the definition of "done," and other policies should be as well. Make those definitions visible to team members.	Listen to team members during the process.	Adjust the process to fit the team and experiment.

Kanban frameworks in manufacturing contrast with Henry Ford's popular assembly line model. With kanban, manufacturers follow the unit through the process to completion, rather than separating the process among different teams or individuals. A key takeaway is the second principle: limiting work in progress. The team does one thing at a time, completing the task at hand before picking up the next.

KANBAN AND TEAMS

David J. Anderson, author, thought leader, and CEO of LeanKanban University, has pioneered the growing application of kanban to information technology teams. His books illustrate teams that apply kanban and use manufacturing metrics to chart work.

Kanban provides a framework that can augment existing workflow methods to manage and measure productivity. In IT organizations, the framework outlines the team's ability to support existing and new business processes and operations. I have observed successful applications of kanban across the adoption spectrum—from full-scale adoption, with supporting tools and team rituals, to simply adopting principle No. 1: make the work visible in the team room.
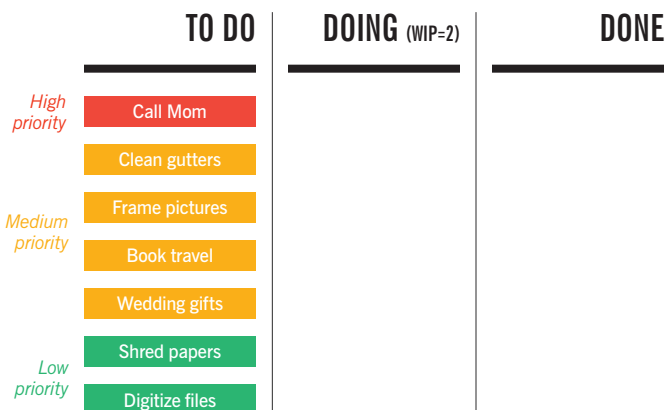
For example, agile software development teams often visualize work in the form of sticky notes or cards on a virtual or physical wall, or kanban board. The work moves from left to right as team members select from a backlog of prioritized work. Team members feel satisfied as they complete tasks and watch the story progress toward completion.

Work is defined before reaching the backlog to ensure that team members understand what they must do. Writing code and orchestrating infrastructure and software in harmony are not comparable

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Columns are clearly labeled.

WIP limits are defined.

TO DO	DOING (WIP=2)	DONE
High priority — Call Mom		
Clean gutters		
Medium priority — Frame pictures		
Book travel		
Wedding gifts		
Low priority — Shred papers		
Digitize files		

All tasks are in the "to do" column and are not yet in process.

TO DO	DOING (WIP=2)	DONE
Frame pictures	Call Mom	
Book travel	Clean gutters	
Wedding gifts		
Shred papers		
Digitize files		

Two tasks, including a high-priority task, have been "picked up" and are in progress.

TO DO	DOING (WIP=2)	DONE
Book travel	Frame pictures	Call Mom
Wedding gifts	Shred papers	Clean gutters
Digitize files		
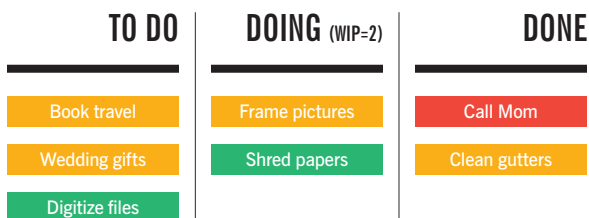
Two tasks have been completed and two others are now in play. The user decided to pick a lower-priority card than other "standard" tasks on the board, while still adhering to the WIP limit.

You might consider adding start and end dates to the board to track cycle time, although this may be superfluous for a home kanban board, considering the users and types of tasks. Measurement of cycle time to complete tasks may be less important at home than in a business context, where time equals money.

to building widgets on an assembly line. The immediate task is often not obvious. The product is not easily divisible into discrete chunks of work. Story estimation, tasking, and backlog prioritization are key to effective agile development. These concepts are not fully covered in kanban, yet kanban is a framework teams can layer over existing management processes and efforts to define work. A visual of the team's work in process is a good place to start.

Teams using kanban should discuss and use principle No. 2, defining "work in progress" limits. They make those limits visible on the kanban board. Though it may be difficult to set strict limits at first, I recommend one item in progress per person, then adjust as needed. Some teams define emergency work types that can supersede WIP limits. But if everything is emergency work, something else is wrong. Limiting the work a team has in process means each member does only one thing at a time, eliminating context switching. In turn, this decreases task cycle time, speeds up product feature completion, and increases the value delivered to the business. Furthermore, limiting WIP increases quality; when we are distracted, our work suffers.

Implementing kanban can be an adjustment. If principle No. 3, measures, says the work is taking too long, the manager and team may adjust as needed. Measurement is key to balancing the workload and the types of work with the varying skills and specialties of the team. Breaking the habit of picking up too much work is difficult; try to recognize where you need to limit WIP. It is important to abide by principle No. 4: make process policies explicit. Make sure individuals adhere to the policies and do not stretch activities beyond defined team agreements.

This framework applies regardless of the subject matter. Workflow managers can use it to assist any team of knowledge workers, not just information technology teams. Individuals picking up tasks from the kanban board are empowered to select the task that best fits their skills and interests. Combined with core management principles, kanban can help maximize productivity and individual fulfillment in work teams and at home.

AT HOME

After studying kanban in the workplace, I began experimenting with it at home. Like most employed professionals, I have about 50 "free" hours a week. How should I split that time among family, social obligations, home improvement, volunteer work, and professional activities? The principles of kanban and lean process management help streamline my work at home and maximize my enjoyment of free time.

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Kanban helps me minimize the time I'm doing "work" at home and provides more unstructured time for fun activities with people I care about. The example on page 60 shows a progression of my home kanban board, with one "full-time" resource (me) and one "flex" resource (my husband and partner, Russell).

Using an at-home kanban board helps me complete these types of tasks without letting them drag on. Rather than saving money, this approach helps me articulate everything that I need to do, and communicate those tasks to my partner in a more digestible form than a to-do list. I am motivated to set aside time for bigger projects in order to clear the board. It's an ongoing experiment with inconclusive quantitative and positive qualitative results.

SUPPORT REQUIRED

Improvement and process changes always require the correct support system to ensure that they stick. Support looks different depending on the size of the team—or the family—and the complexity or quantity of the work.

The number of team members affects the self-awareness and maturity of the team, as well as its management and leadership. A family with three children has far different needs—and, therefore, different task types, WIP limits, and process policies—than a young couple. Similarly, a product with three interworking development teams is very different from a siloed four-person project team. Listen to team members and revisit process policies as needed. The way you implement principle No. 5, policies and feedback loops, may vary. But kanban principles apply no matter the size, age, or skill diversity of the team.

We all want to do activities we enjoy, are passionate about, and know will bring value to our organizations and the world. Therefore, it is important that we know how best to use our time to adeptly manage our work and consider our constraints. Experiments in kanban at work and at home can save ourselves, our companies, and our families valuable time.

Context switching between tasks comes with real costs. We all know what it is like to be deep into an email, analysis, or conversation when a colleague approaches and asks, "May I interrupt you for a minute?" No matter the venue, it is rude to say no, but there is a cost to accepting the interruption. The cycle time—the time to complete the task—increases. In our personal time management, the cost may be individual productivity. When applied to work teams, the cost is measurable and can demonstrate to leadership and executive sponsors the value of a kanban application.

Although originally applied to manufacturing, and popularized in mixed-skill information technology teams, kanban can help individuals and teams stay organized and on task across settings, whether at work, in life, or at play. Always keep in mind principle No. 6—to collaboratively improve—and experiment with new ideas. Failure is OK; we are all works in progress.

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