



Making Kanban Personal

The visual management system that creates efficiency in the workplace and for everyday tasks.



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When it comes to continuous improvement initiatives, a common mistake made by company leadership is to leave lean manufacturing, constraint management, and six sigma on the production floor. Select lean manufacturing tools do sometimes make it into the office, but those efforts are often limited to an emphasis on 5S. This is unfortunate, as there are great gains to be made using value stream mapping to review and plan improvements to administrative processes. There is one lean tool, however, that rarely makes it past the office wall. When it does, it is usually kept in a closet — the supply closet, that is. That tool is kanban.

Kanban has quite the history as a productivity

improver in the plant, where inventory management can make the difference in shipping on time. Occasionally, kanban systems are used to manage more than product-related inventory, moving into administration to manage office or breakroom supplies. However, for the few who care to get personal with it, kanban can even change the way they manage their day.

Defining Kanban

Kanban is a Japanese word that means “sign” or “signal.” When entered into popular online translation software, its result is “signboard.” For those who understand kanban, the translation makes perfect

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sense. It is used to signal a condition or to indicate that an action needs to take place.

When used to manage inventories and to direct work through production processes, these signals indicate what work is available for processing, what is being worked on at any given time, what work is complete, and what supplies need to be replenished.

In an office environment, kanban can be very robust when used as a work management tool to help organize and prioritize the work that an individual needs to accomplish on any given day. For some, the to-do list serves them well, while some have highly repetitive jobs where no lists are necessary as they cycle through the same set of activities day after day. In the latter instance, kanban may not be as meaningful. However, for those in a high-variety environment, or for folks who are more visual by nature, a visual work management system like kanban might be just the answer.

Achieving Visual Management

A kanban board is a tool most often used to manage inventory on the shop floor. In order to understand how that might apply to nonproduction work tasks, one will need to start thinking of those tasks as if they are inventory. Once the concept of work as inventory is grasped, the methodology is pretty much the same.

On the production floor, inventory is typically found in a few common places: in the warehouse; in queue to be processed, in process, or delayed; or in finished goods (i.e., warehouse or shipping). There may be other categories (inactive, damaged, scrapped, waiting to be reworked, etc.), but these are not necessarily needed in an office environment.

In order to facilitate the mindset of work as inventory, these categories will need to be redefined.

- Work in the warehouse becomes work one needs “To Do”
- Work in queue to be processed becomes work one needs to process “Today”
- Work that is in process becomes work one is “Doing”
- Work that is delayed becomes work that is “Waiting”
- Work that is finished becomes work that is “Done”

The process of using kanban to manage this inventory of work tasks can be illustrated by drawing a simple grid and using sticky notes. In an office environment, this often takes place on a whiteboard, but it works well on a piece of A3 paper or inside an open file folder.

Once the grid is drawn, a kanban board is born. Work tasks will be written on sticky notes, and since these tasks will move between columns, the sticky notes need to be small enough to fit. On a large whiteboard, the 3x3"-size should work well with room to spare. On A3 paper or in a file folder, the smaller 1.5x2"-size notes are ideal.

To Do Column

An individual's work inventory that is in queue to be processed may be found in a variety of locations: a list of some sort, calendar program, physical inbox, email, or written as a reminder on a piece of paper. Locations where work awaits becomes the feeder to get work written on sticky notes and transferred into the To Do column. Each sticky note should contain a task that is waiting to be processed. This column is where all new work tasks should go prior to moving across the board.

Today Column

The Today column is where the

workday gets planned. Higher priority tasks should go here so they can get processed first. Depending on the type of work that is being performed by a worker, this could range from a few notes to 10 or more. It all depends on how long the tasks are expected to take and how much capacity an individual has in a day's time. On full office days, more can be processed than when traveling or on days with multiple meetings.

In high-variety work environments, visual planning is highly effective as tasks can be easily viewed and priority items pulled forward. The alternative — writing and rewriting on lists or re-dating calendar tasks — is much more cumbersome.

Doing Column

The Doing column is the most important on the board as it sets the pace for the velocity at which work speeds through the system. For this reason, how this column is managed can make or break the kanban system.

For kanban to work properly, limits must be set. On the shop floor, this is accomplished by setting physical visual boundaries so that work cannot pile up and thus slow down production. On this kanban board, it is accomplished by limiting the amount of work that can be in process at any one time. This is referred to as the WIP limit. The recommended limit for tasks in the Doing column is 3. If this column gets loaded up with partially finished tasks, the worker will find it harder to focus and will be more prone to jump between tasks, which limits effectiveness and slows throughput. Every time a task is set aside to focus on something else, time is lost getting reoriented when picking it back up again. Although multitasking sounds like a good

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To learn more about kanban and other lean initiatives, make plans to attend PRINTING United Alliance's 2021 Continuous Improvement Conference in Columbus, Ohio, Aug. 22-25.



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When setting up a kanban board, a worker will likely find work that has already been started. These tasks also need to be recorded on notes but can be placed directly into the Doing column.

Waiting Column

The Waiting column is reserved for tasks that have been started and handed off to someone else, or are waiting on something outside the worker's control, before they can be completed. This column is especially useful as it keeps items visible so the worker can follow up as needed. It is recommended that the Waiting column be reviewed at the beginning of the day so that any follow up can be handled immediately.

Done Column

The Done column is just that, where

task notes are placed when they are finished. This column is the most fulfilling as one can look back on the day and find satisfaction with the amount of work completed. It is also useful to help gauge how well the team did when planning their day. If desired, these notes can be dated and kept in a separate location as a record.

Working the System

Work on a kanban board moves based on its current status, just like inventory moves around in a production facility. The goal is to complete work as quickly as possible while managing higher payoff items.

The day is planned by pulling work into the Today column. The Waiting column is reviewed to see if any work needs to be followed up on. Once the day is planned, work can commence. As each new task is started, it is pulled over into

the Doing column and stays there until it moves to the Done column or requires action by someone else. If it gets handed off (but will come back), it goes into the Waiting column. The key to productivity is to keep a minimum of tasks in process at any one time. As long as the work in process is kept low, focus is increased. More work actually gets done because the worker is not distracted by stopping and restarting tasks.

For those who truly struggle with focusing on one thing at a time, the Pomodoro technique is recommended. The Pomodoro method is simply to set a timer for an uninterrupted work cycle and to allow no interruptions — no phone calls, no texts, etc. The recommended timeframe for a work cycle is 25 minutes, a time that almost anyone can manage. At the end of the 25-minute cycle, a mini-break is recommended before resetting the timer and continuing. Folks who adopt this technique are amazed at how quickly work progresses when given full attention.

Adopting Kanban for personal work management increases overall throughput as well as overall effectiveness. Using a visual system improves planning, increases focus, and leads to less mistakes. The system can be used for managing projects in a team environment and works equally well in non-work situations like completing weekend projects at home.

Step-by-step instructions are available in a free webinar on SCMEP's online learning platform. Look for "Personal Kanban" at scmep-online.org/catalog. ■

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