Kanban Boards overview

A summary of what they are & description of how a team works with them

What is a Kanban board?

A Kanban board is a team collaboration tool designed to help visualise work tasks and focus on their progress and completion of these; thereby helping teams to align better on achieving outcomes. Kanban boards often use Post-its, a board divided into columns, and plenty of team ideas to help identify what work tasks need to be done, and where they are up to in getting them done!

Kanban boards get everyone on the same page and are helpful for teams to understand their whole collection of work. The board forms the focus of short team meetings (10 – 15mins) where the team discuss "how we are going?" and gain a much better understanding of the current status & topics of the moment.
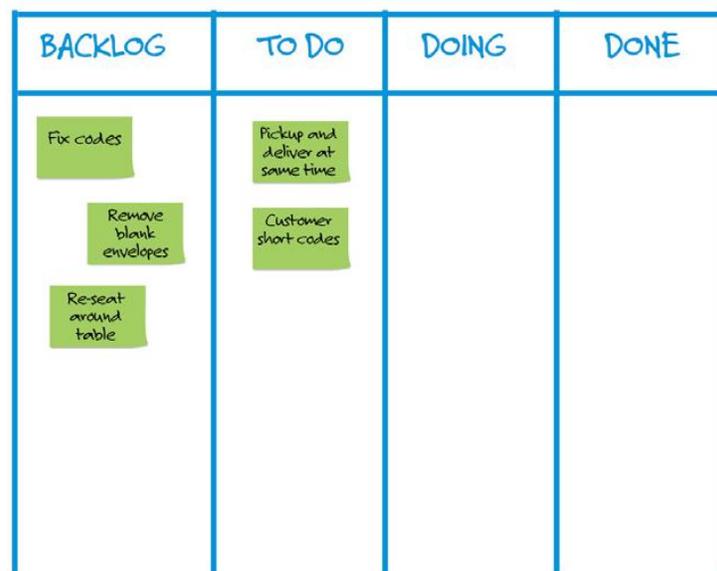

Figure 1 Example of a Kanban board

Physical boards

Large boards that are divided into vertical columns. Teams often markup columns on a whiteboard and use these to place Post-it notes onto the board. The Post-it notes are moved by the team to show their progress on the board.

Digital boards

Kanban boards can also be utilised in digital form. Digital boards allow teams that do not share a physical office space to use Kanban boards remotely and at the same time.

Elements of a Kanban board

Kanban boards are made up of three components: The Team Mission, Visual Signals and Columns.

The Team Mission — A short statement to capture the Objective(s), the Team Members and who the Sponsor is that is endorsing the work of the team. The Outcomes intended to be achieved are most often phrased using "*How can we…?*" followed by "*In order to…?*", to clearly describe the intended result and why it's needed.

Visual Signals — One of the first things you'll notice about a Kanban board is the visual element, most often using Post-its or sometimes cards. Teams write all of their individual work items onto Post-its, one item per Post-it. Once these are on a Kanban board, they provide 'visual signals' to help teammates and stakeholders quickly understand what the team is working on and where it's up to.

Columns — Kanban boards are sectioned into columns, which can be as simple as "To Do," "Doing," and "Done". Each column represents a specific activity that the Post-its are up to, together seen as a flow of work or "workflow". Post-its are moved through the columns by the team according to their 'status', the Post-its completing each stage until they are completed or "Done".

Optional columns:

"Backlog" — Teams often use a Backlog column on a Kanban board. This is where stakeholders and teammates put new ideas up for the team to consider & decide to action.

"Blockers" – any issues that are hampering progress or affecting the quality of outcome trying to be achieved are identified using Post-its in the "Blockers" column and immediately escalated to the Sponsor to resolve.
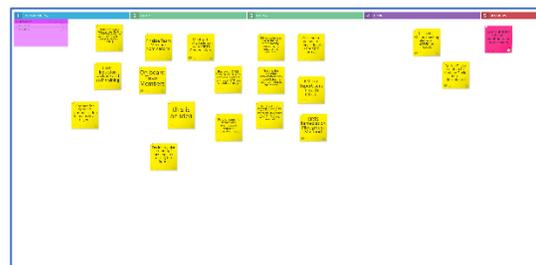

Figure 2 example of a physical kanban board

Figure 3 example of a digital kanban board

Kanban Boards team practice

Getting started

Kanban boards start by using what you have now. This means you don't have to completely change the work you're currently doing to get started with using Kanban boards. To be successful following the approach requires four things:

- The Team are endorsed to conduct the chosen Team Mission by a Sponsor and understand the current processes, as they are actually practiced.

- The Team respect the diversity of people, value the views & opinions of others and can see benefits in trying out new ways of working.

- The Team is open to and agree to pursue continuous improvement through evolutionary change by making small changes and seeking feedback.

- Acts of leadership at every level are openly encouraged - from individual contributors to senior management.

Kanban boards function through a team process, so the first thing your team should do is get together! To get started, the team need to try and break down the chosen Team Mission into distinct activities.

The team does this by setting up a team meeting to brainstorm & write down all of their ideas on Post-its. At this stage, the Team also need to discuss & decide the size and scope of individual Post-its. If something is too large or challenging, it is best to break it up into multiple Post-its. From this point, the team needs to figure out the order of tasks that need to be done and sets up an initial starting pattern of Post-its on a Kanban board.

Team Meetings

Held at a regular time and rhythm, (typically once per day), Team meetings are known as "Stand-ups" and are designed to quickly inform everyone of the current status & progress towards completing the Team Mission. It's not a forum to provide management briefings or discuss detailed information about team activities. The tone should be light and fun, but informative. Each team member in turn answers the following questions:

What did I complete yesterday?

What will I work on today?

Am I blocked by anything?

There's an implicit accountability in reporting what work you have completed in front of your peers, as no-one wants to be the team member who is constantly talking about the same thing and not making progress.