Work-In-Process (WIP) limits are rules used in business to help teams become more efficient by focusing on finishing existing tasks before starting new ones. It's like saying, "Stop starting, start finishing." This concept is important when trying to remove waste from a company's processes.

WIP limits, simply put, restrict the number of tasks being worked on at a time. These limits can be applied at various levels, from individual workers to entire teams, and often are represented on tools like a Kanban board. Having a limit helps us make important decisions about which tasks to prioritize. If a team never reaches its WIP limit, it could be a sign that they can handle more work. A common starting point for setting these limits is the number of team members plus one.

It may seem weird that doing less at a time can lead to getting more done, but it's true. This approach helps avoid problems like context switching, which happens when we try to multitask. It's found that it takes about 23 minutes to regain focus after a brief interruption. So, if we're interrupted five times a day, we lose nearly two hours every day to context switching. That's like wasting an entire day of work each week! By focusing on fewer projects at a time, WIP limits can help us complete work faster, and with higher quality.

Too much work can also lead to more meetings, which are often used to keep everyone up to date. Meetings aren't bad, but having too many can be inefficient and costly. WIP limits can help reduce the need for so many meetings. With fewer projects, everyone has a clearer idea of what's going on and can spend more time actually working.

Lastly, having too much work can cause duplicate efforts, where multiple people are unknowingly working on the same thing. Visualizing work assignments can help prevent this. Regular meetings can also help by providing a space for teams to discuss current work and how to move things along. This way, everyone stays on the same page and is working together more effectively.

The most important points are that WIP limits help teams to focus on finishing work rather than starting new tasks. This approach leads to less waste, fewer unnecessary meetings, and better communication, making the team more efficient overall.

The other most important point is WIP limits should be reviewed and adjusted regularly, especially when there are changes in the workflow. The reviews should involve the entire team, and given serious thought.

References

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