

What Is an Online Kanban Board?

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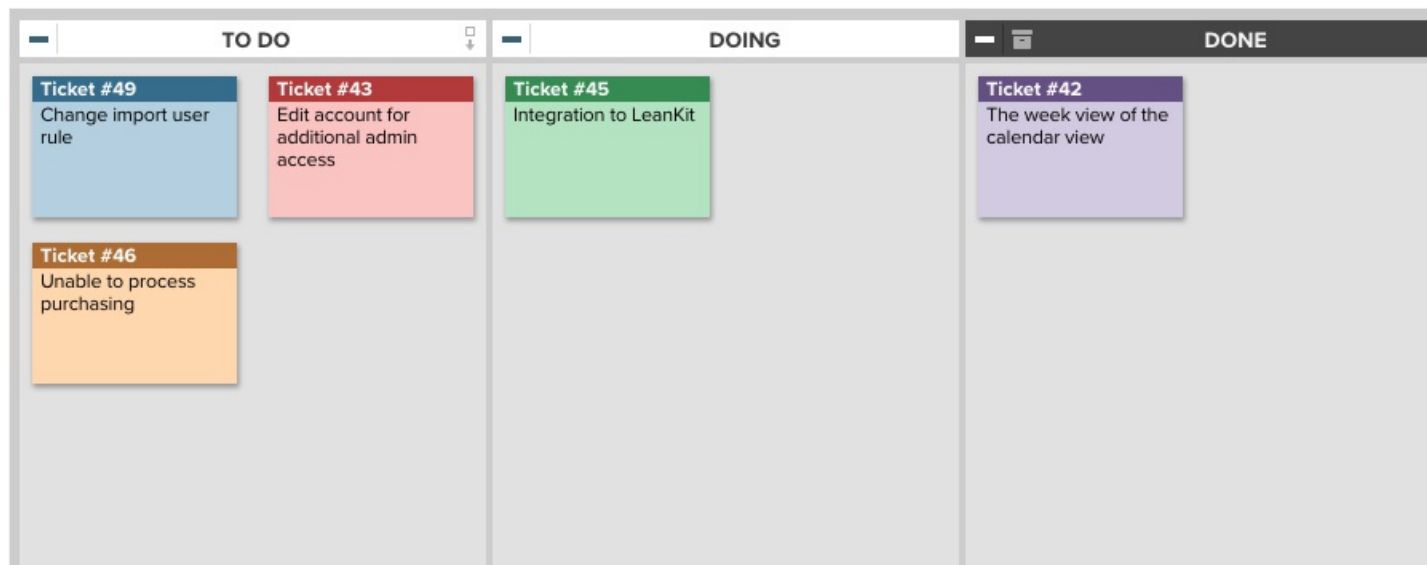
An online Kanban board is a tool that helps visualize work and workflow, as well as optimize the way work gets done. Then name comes from the Japanese word Kanban, meaning “visual signal” or “card,” and also references the process improvement approach known as the Kanban Method.



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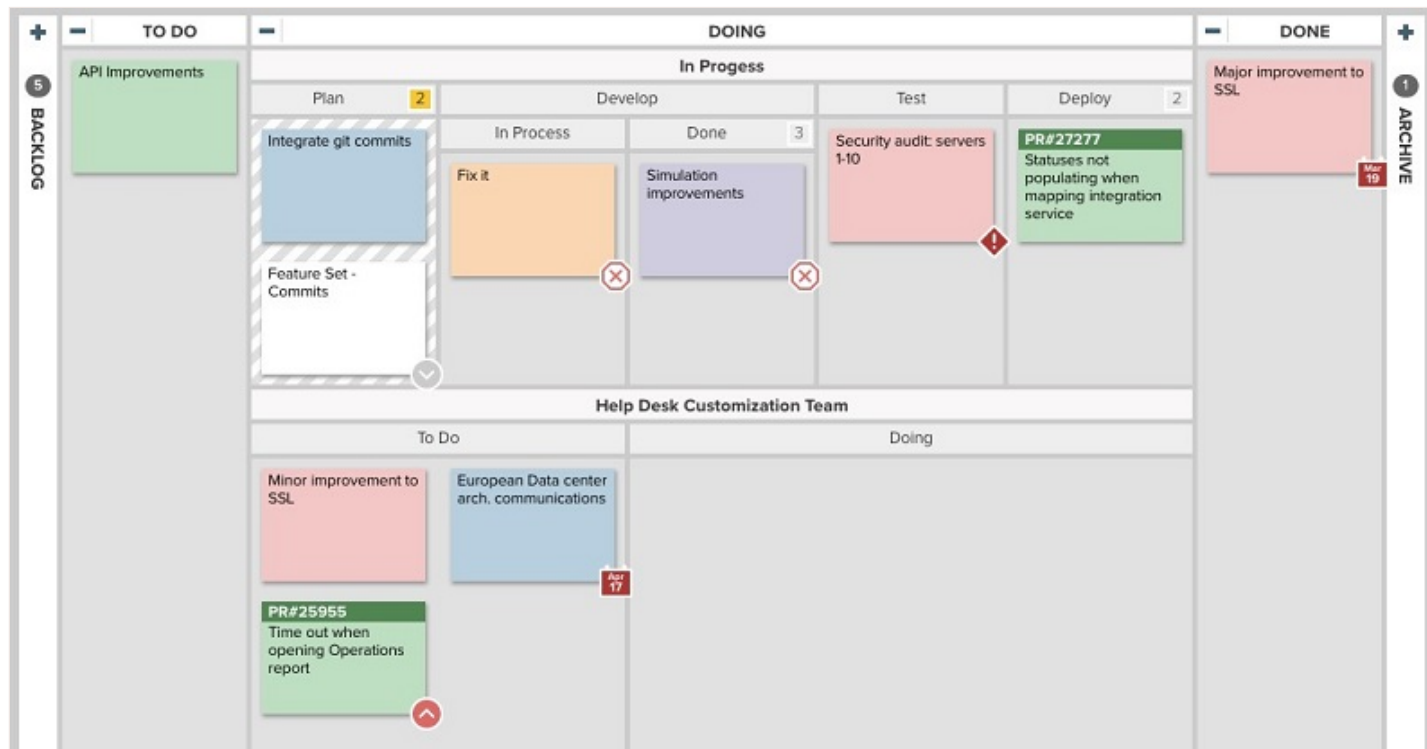


An online Kanban board with a basic, three-step workflow

How an Online Kanban Board Works

Like a physical Kanban board, online Kanban boards use vertical and horizontal lanes to represent the steps that work takes to advance from start to finish. Typically, boards are set up for work items to move from left to right, starting with a backlog of future work items in the far left lane, and completed work items in the far right, “Done” lane.

Kanban cards, representing tasks and work items, are [moved through the lanes](#) to reflect progress. To mirror the way cards might move across a physical board, most online Kanban boards rely on drag-and-drop functionality to move cards from one lane to the next.



With an online Kanban board, you create horizontal and vertical lanes to easily mirror your process.

Card details:

The “face” (front) of each card has visual icons to communicate key details like:

- **Priority:** How important or urgent is this work item compared to others?
- **Ownership:** Who is responsible for or currently working on this work item?
- **Blockers:** Is there anything keeping this work item from moving forward in the process?
- **Due Date:** When is the target completion date for this work item?

Different types of work are represented using card color: For example, a green card type might be used for new features, while red cards might represent break / fix work, and blue cards might represent continuous improvement initiatives.

All of these visual indicators are meant to help team members and stakeholders gather information quickly, without having to interrupt work in order to get an understanding of status.

On most online Kanban boards, you can open cards by clicking on them to reveal more detailed information and access any relevant attachments or links, as well as card history. The goal for any team using an online Kanban board is to be able to store all the information related to a card within the card itself. This not only makes it easier to collaborate with team members, it also provides a level of visibility and accountability usually unavailable at the team level.

As a result, every team member or stakeholder – whether they’re onsite or distributed around the world – gets at-a-glance, shared understanding of the status of their work, including who’s working on what, where the work is in the process, and where there are impediments.

How Online Kanban Boards Support Real-Time Collaboration

Online Kanban boards make it easier for teams of all sizes to effectively collaborate on what work needs to be done and when. They also provide tools to measure, analyze, and continuously improve processes.

Here are the specific ways using an online Kanban board supports real-time collaboration for a team.

Visualizing work and process steps

Creating a visual model of work and workflow allows team members to [observe the flow of work](#) as it moves through their boards. This shared “picture” of work provides insight into work status and minimizes the time spent tracking down progress reports or sitting in status update meetings. Team members and stakeholders can quickly communicate high-value information in a way that is frictionless and transparent.

Seeing work as it flows through your team’s process is a gamechanger for teams, who are often used to operating with little to no visibility into the big picture.

Simply visualizing work on an online Kanban board enables more effective collaboration by helping everyone “connect the dots” between the work they’re doing with the work of others on the team.

Improving flow and limiting work in progress

One of the key principles of Kanban is the concept of flow: Optimizing the way work moves from “to do” to “done,” with the goal of making this flow as frictionless and unidirectional as possible.

An online Kanban board helps a team improve the flow of their work by helping them see just how many items are in progress at any given time. Often, teams add and add and add work items into their system until progress comes completely to a halt. There’s a lot of activity, a lot happening at once, but almost no forward motion.

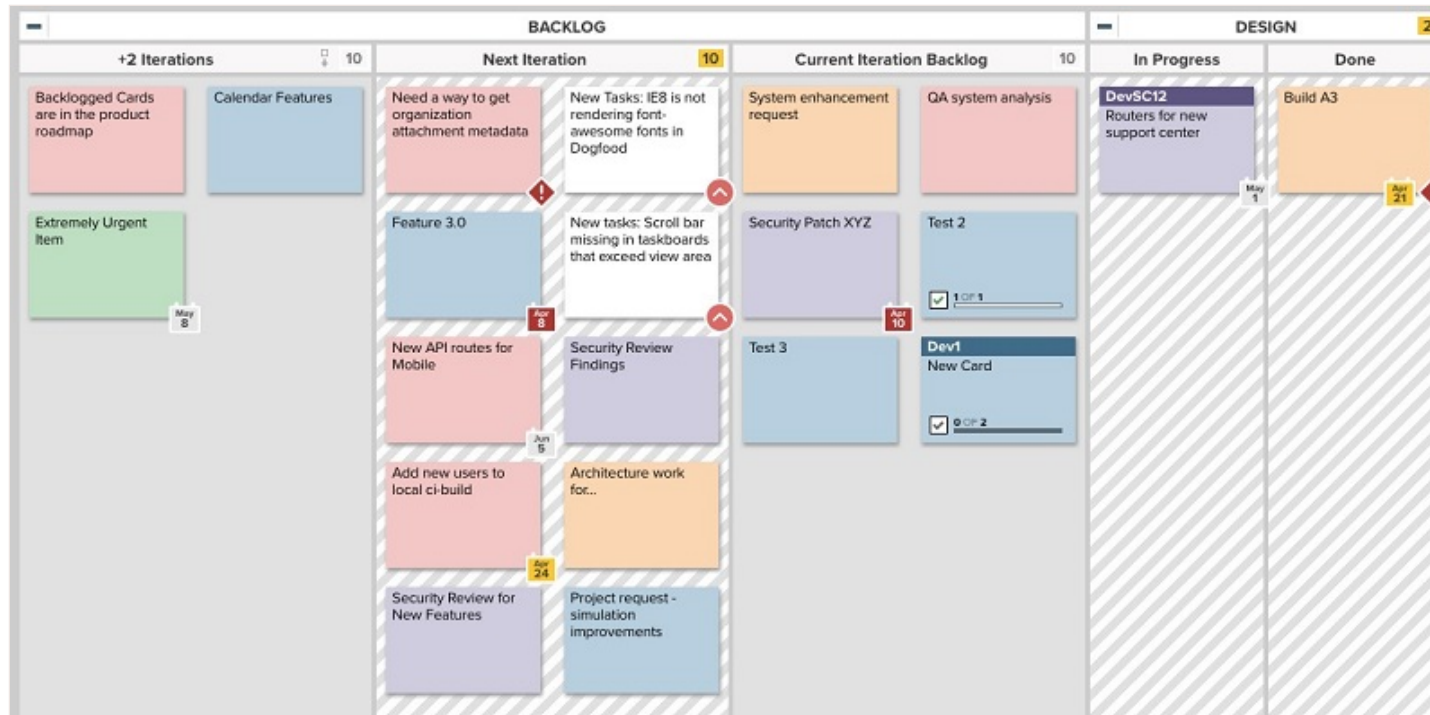
Here’s an illustrated example of why this happens: Imagine a highway in the middle of the night. If you’re the only car on the road, it’s up to you to decide how quickly or slowly you’re moving. If you want to go five miles an hour, you can, but it’s more likely that you’ll go a little faster, taking advantage of the space and freedom you have on the open road. There’s nothing stopping you from getting from point A to point B, so you can predict with a great degree of accuracy how long it might take you to travel a certain distance.

Now imagine the opposite scenario: Traffic at rush hour. The road is packed with cars, all sitting bumper to bumper. Your speed isn’t up to you; it’s determined by the “flow” of traffic, which isn’t really flowing at all. It’s difficult to predict how long it’ll take you to get home, because your speed depends on the activity of those around you.

When we start work without respect to what’s already in progress, we clog up our system, slowing progress down with each work item added. Limiting work in progress (WIP), otherwise known as implementing WIP limits on the online Kanban board, helps teams maintain control over the speed with which work moves through their system.

Although it often feels counterintuitive, especially at first, by doing less at any given time, by limiting their WIP, teams are able to get more done, faster. This enables better, more efficient collaboration in a few ways:

- With fewer work items in progress, **handoffs between team members** happen faster and more smoothly
- With fewer distractions, team members are able to work with **greater clarity and speed**
- Problems and delays caused by **task switching** and the need to constantly reprioritize items are reduced
- With less going on at once, **teams stay aligned** more easily, reducing the need for status meetings
- Work items typically spend **less time in “wait states” or queues**, because team members are more readily available to pull them through the system
- Overall cycle times tend to decrease, meaning that teams are **better able to deliver work on time, on budget, and on value**
- Teams are able to deliver work **more predictably**, which has a positive impact on morale



WIP limits on an online Kanban board show when a lane has reached capacity, and that adding work items might negatively impact speed.

Encouraging systems thinking

Systems thinking is a way of analyzing work that focuses on the parts of a system and how they interact. All too often, teams don't function like teams at all. They operate more like functional silos: One person completes a task, and throws it over a wall to another person. People optimize for their individual part, often at the expense of the whole.

Using an online Kanban board can encourage teams to practice systems thinking, by helping everyone see how the different parts of the team's "system" work together.

Practicing Kanban creates a sense of accountability across the team for not only the work that lives on the board, but the structure of the board itself. In order for the board to be truly useful, teams have to work together to structure and use it in a way that makes it functional for everyone on the team.

That means that as a team, they have to:

- Discuss the process(es) they follow, and define each step in the process(es)
- Talk about how they will use the board, and establish any process policies necessary to ensure that process is followed
- Discuss capacity in a more tangible and specific way than ever before

The purpose of all of this discussion is to help teams work together more effectively.

After the initial meetings where teams map out their process and build their boards, many teams using an online Kanban board begin holding daily standup meetings, or standups, to quickly sync up and discuss any topics that might not be able to be addressed on the board, such as how to prioritize one project over another.

Standups are also a time for the team to discuss how to move work over the finish line as a team. In Kanban, the team is collectively responsible for completing the work on the board. By operating this

way, teams are motivated to collaborate to make decisions that support the team's ability to create value, not just the individuals within it.

Reducing waste

Most team processes inherently contain a significant amount of waste. Borrowing from the Lean definition of "waste," meaning any activity that does not add value to the customer, examples of waste in team processes can include:

Defects

Waste related to failure to meet (internal or external) customer expectations; often results in rework

Overprocessing

Waste related to creating more work or higher quality / more detailed work than is required; also can come in the form of duplicate effort

Waiting

Waste related to work sitting in queues, or wait states

Unused Talent

Waste related to the underutilization of team member talent, due to process inefficiency

Inventory

Waste created by excess products or services that are not fully processed, and therefore do not add value to the customer

Motion

Waste related to unnecessary movements by people, such as multiple meetings about the same piece of work

Overproduction

Waste related to unnecessary movements by people, such as multiple meetings about the same piece of work

Overproduction

Waste created by producing more than is necessary

Often, because they aren't visualized, these types of waste go undetected in teams. Visualizing work on an online Kanban board makes it easier to identify and eliminate waste from team processes.

Supporting a culture of continuous improvement

For many teams, the idea of continuous improvement is nice on paper, but difficult or impossible in practice. That's because without data to establish benchmarks, set measurable goals, or track progress, improvement efforts seem like "nice to haves," compared to urgent or important project-driven work.

Using an online Kanban board provides a team with a way to track and measure their performance, and visualize improvement efforts in a way that keeps them top-of-mind: Right on the team board.

When configured correctly (more on that in the next section), an online Kanban board can be used to track and measure:

- **Flow:** How do work items progress from “To Do” to “Done?”
- **Throughput:** How many work items is the team able to move through the board during any period of time?
- **Quality:** Measuring defects or problems compared to project-driven work, measuring rework.
- **Lead times:** How long does it take a work item to get to “Done,” starting from the time it is requested / prioritized?
- **Cycle times:** How long does it take a work item to get from one point to another in the process?

These metrics make improvement efforts measurable and actionable for teams, and can help teams identify future opportunities for improvement, as well as predict potential issues before they arise.

Using an online Kanban board takes a conversation about capacity, for example, from “I’m swamped with work all the time,” to “I have 1.5-2x the number of work items on the board as fellow team members. What can we do to distribute this work more evenly?”

Through the analysis of these board metrics, teams can discover ways to:

- Streamline or modify processes
- Remove waste from the system
- Deliver work more predictably
- Improve speed and productivity

- Prioritize work items more effectively
- Distribute work across the team more evenly
- Gain a better understanding of capacity
- Continuously improve day-to-day operations

Configuring an Online Kanban Board for Analytics and Reporting

It's worth noting that in order for an online Kanban board to provide valuable and useful metrics, the board has to be configured in a way to collect these metrics meaningfully.

Here are a few examples of places where teams should work together to ensure their boards are set up for accurate analytics and reporting:

Where does work start?

In order to accurately measure Kanban board metrics like lead time and cycle time, it's important to have a designated lane where work officially starts.

Some teams choose to use their online Kanban board for both long-term planning and real-time workflow management, meaning that they might have work items sitting in their backlog for long periods of time. In this case, the team might choose to have a "Backlog" lane on the far left side of their board, but choose to "start" work by moving it into a "To Do" lane to the immediate right of the Backlog.

Other teams might use a separate Kanban board for backlog planning / management, only moving cards onto their main team board when the work has been prioritized.

Where do we put completed work items?

Many online Kanban boards register a work item as completed when it moves to a specific lane – either a lane that has been designated as a “Done” lane, or more commonly, the lane on the farthest right-hand side of the board.

It’s important to know how your Kanban board tool measures when work is “done-done,” so that metrics like cycle time, lead time, throughput, and others can be accurately reported. Decide as a team where completed work items should go, so that these metrics are accurate and useful.

How do we keep track of target/actual completion dates?

Most online Kanban boards allow you to select specific due dates for each card. Some tools also offer ways to visualize and report on work items that go “stale” (have not been updated or moved for a certain period of time) or are past due.

If keeping track of target and actual completion dates is important for your team, make sure that the team is using the due date functions on each card in the same way to ensure that these metrics can be accurately reported.

Online Kanban Boards and Integrations

One of the hesitations many teams have around implementing an online Kanban board is that they are already using other tools to manage their work. The problem is that often within one team, several different tools (and categories of tools) are being used. Consolidating information into a shared view usually involves manually duplicating information, which is inherently wasteful, and is likely to be inaccurate.

But for stakeholders, or anyone who needs to have a big-picture view of all ongoing work, a lack of visibility into where work “is” can be incredibly frustrating and limiting.

Using an online Kanban board can help by combining all the information from disparate tools (without additional effort) through the power of integration. Many Kanban tools offer two-way integrations with:

- Issue/ticket tracker tools
- Portfolio management tools
- Other work management tools
- Time tracking tools
- Code depository tools
- Documentation tools
- ERP/MRP tools
- And more

Before choosing an online Kanban tool, take inventory of what tools are currently being used on your team and in your organization to track and measure work to see what integrations will be necessary

to create a complete and accurate system.

Using Kanban Boards Online

We hope that this article has given you a better understanding of how using an online Kanban board can help your team collaborate more effectively, embrace continuous improvement, and consolidate all the information you need to create a complete and accurate picture of your team's work.

In the next section of this series, we'll share 10 Kanban board examples to inspire your team to configure its board to reflect your unique process.

Meet our author



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