How Kanban Tools Improve Productivity

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In nearly every industry, opportunities for remote collaboration are coming to fruition. Kanban tools enable virtual teams to thrive in this environment.

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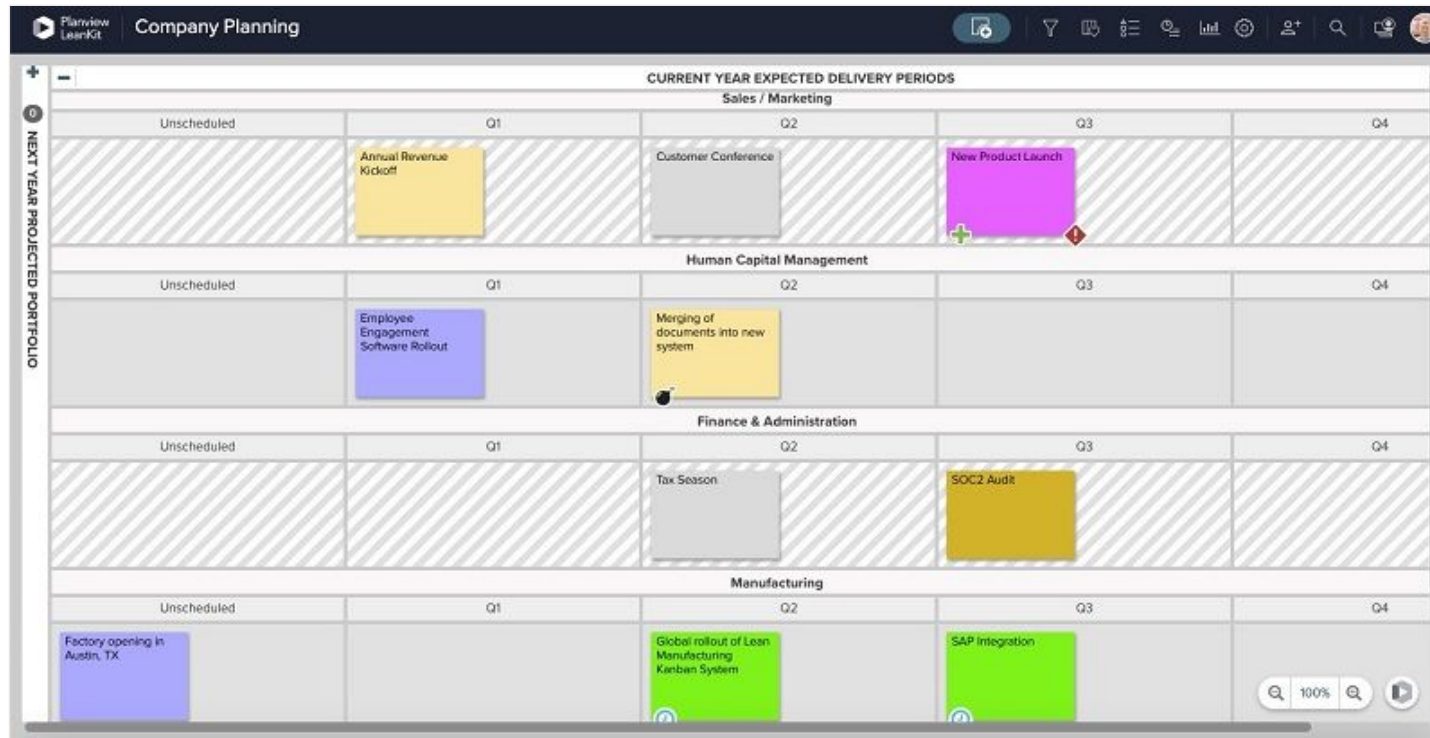
Kanban tools can help enhance work visualization for virtual teams, regardless of their department.

Working remotely offers unprecedented flexibility for individuals, while allowing companies to compete in an increasingly globalized society. However, working on virtual teams comes with challenges, including keeping everyone aligned and connected even when teams are distributed around the world.

Kanban tools boost productivity for virtual teams by creating a shared virtual space where work can live. A Kanban board can be designed to help teams identify areas of inefficiency and promote more dynamic collaboration.

Here's how Kanban tools improve productivity for all types of teams, and why they are especially well-suited for keeping virtual teams aligned.

Understanding Kanban Tools

A Kanban board is a tool that is effective at easily communicating a large amount of information using cards, columns, colors, icons, and other visual indicators that help people comprehend and retain information. Most teams that use Kanban tools develop their own unique configurations, making it easier to manage processes and workflows that are important to helping their businesses run smoothly.

The key to creating an effective Kanban system lies within its ease of use; teams that are most productive with Kanban tools are those that customize their boards to not only improve productivity and efficiency, but also help them spot opportunities for improvement. This is a concept known as continuous improvement, an integral aspect of Kanban philosophy.

Project managers, scrum masters, team leaders, and individual team members all benefit from the visibility of a shared online Kanban board because it can be accessed from any location with an internet connection. This makes it easier to collaborate, give and receive status updates, and generally see what's going on at a glance. Teams that adopt Kanban tools are often surprised at how much waste can be removed from existing processes and workflows simply by mapping out their processes on a Kanban board.

Choosing the Best Kanban Tool for Your Team

Online Kanban tools provide instant project visibility for team members in different locations and among teams working on projects with a variety of complex moving parts and pieces, such as

software development teams and business project teams. Using a virtual Kanban tool, teams can streamline processes and reduce the amount of time it takes to complete a project, thus reducing the cost.
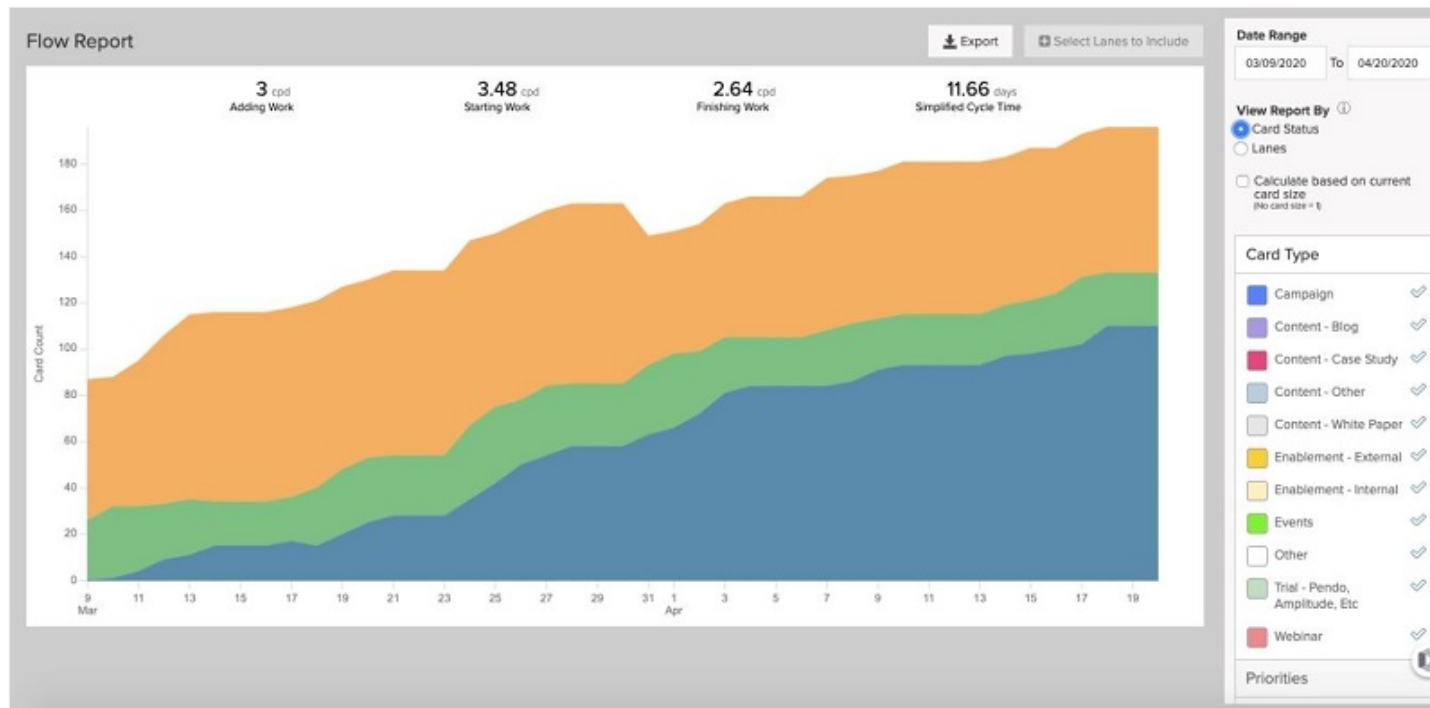
Kanban tools allow you to measure how work moves through your process so your team can leverage metrics to continuously improve.

There are many online Kanban tools. Some are free to use, while others offer more features and functionality as part of paid subscriptions.

The functionality of online Kanban tools varies widely, so it's important to understand what you're needing out of your tool before choosing one. Questions to ask when choosing an online Kanban

tool include:

- Do you plan on using the tool just within your team, or across multiple teams?

- What level of reporting capabilities do you need?

- Is your team / organization planning to practice Lean/Agile formally or simply looking for ways to improve productivity within the team?

- What type of workflows will you follow on your Kanban board?

- Do you anticipate a need to connect cards across multiple boards, or to have hierarchical card or board structures?

- What integrations with other (existing) tools would be helpful?

Talking through these questions with your team can help you identify your success criteria when choosing an online Kanban tool.

Challenges Facing Virtual Teams

In 2019, 69 percent of companies offered telecommuting benefits as an option to employees, according to SHRM's 2019 Employee Benefits Report. Remote work has been shown to both increase productivity and lower attrition, according to research from a Stanford professor.

The study showed that employees working remotely found it easier to concentrate and were less likely to take sick days or prolonged breaks. Employers also saved an average of $2,000 per employee each year on real estate costs.

Still, many corporations have walked back on their work-from-home policies. When Marissa Meyer became CEO of Yahoo in 2013, she took a firm stance against virtual work by banning telecommuting for all employees. She argued that "communication and collaboration" require people to be "working side-by-side" and available for impromptu meetings.

While this stance contradicts the trends, it underscores the concerns some businesses have about remote teams. In addition to fears of employees being less productive, or taking advantage of companies by working fewer hours, research published in the Harvard Business Review states that remote employees are more likely to feel alienated or disconnected when compared to onsite employees.

Other known challenges of working in virtual teams include:

- Communication breakdowns

- Trust issues

- Scheduling conflicts

- Productivity concerns / micromanaging as a result

Rather than reverting back to the old ways of doing business, you can directly address the challenges of managing virtual teams by taking proactive steps to ensure teams have what they need to succeed. When you successfully identify and remedy remote workplace issues, you can build a virtual team that's both collaborative and connected.

Challenges Facing Virtual Teams

A specific challenge associated with virtual teams is workflow management. It can be difficult for project managers to keep track of tasks in process and to tell whether team members are over-or

underworked.

Along with best practices for virtual teams like keeping lines of communication open and establishing shared goals, a Kanban tool offers visibility so the project manager can plan, organize, and prioritize upcoming work. Kanban boards grow with the team, as well as with an organization's teams, and can be set up so that individuals can see the status of everyone's work in one Kanban board or across boards, as needed.

A centralized place for work to live so team members are not wasting time by searching emails and file folders for necessary documents and images offers contextual work collaboration. Collaborators can share Kanban cards with one another with documents and images attached, quickly notifying one another of new information with @mentions in comment threads.

> *Kanban tools are highly effective at identifying bottlenecks that team members may be too busy to mention – or may not have even noticed.*

With a Kanban board, project managers are often able to recognize leading indicators of problems before they occur. When a high-level view is more helpful, flow analytics can help managers see where work is blocked and help get it moving again.

Finally, rather than allowing virtual teams to fall into workflow management routines that don't serve themselves, their team, or the business, Kanban tools enable quick and easy continuous improvement of processes. Project managers can work with their teams to define new lanes and to resize, drag, and divide them into sub-lanes to manage Work-in-Process limits. They can easily model task breakdowns, sub-flows, and process handoffs.

Kanban Tools and Virtual Workflow Management

Introducing or expanding the use of Kanban tools is a proven way to remedy some of the collaboration issues common in all teams, but especially teams with remote employees.

There are many benefits to using a Kanban tool, at every level of the organization:

- **Individuals** are empowered to own, manage, and communicate about their work in a way that keeps them focused and accountable

- **Teams** can stay aligned around work status, updates, and information

- **Managers of teams** have greater visibility into what work is being done, and how it's progressing, helping them understand how they can contribute most meaningfully

- **Executive leadership** can rely on rollup reporting to understand big-picture progress on organization-wide initiatives

For the purpose of this guide, we'll focus on the benefits of Kanban tools for teams – specifically, teams that conduct some or all of their work remotely. For teams, the benefits of using a Kanban tool can include:

- Increased flexibility

- Increased team productivity and efficiency

- Improved focus and alignment across the team

- Deeper, more meaningful collaboration

- Improved morale

- Less time spent in meetings (specifically status meetings)

- More time spent on focused, value-adding work

Implementing Kanban Tools with Your Virtual Team

Innovation occurs more easily when a person or a group is passionate enough about something to want to improve upon it. But often, teams find themselves stuck in old patterns of working, unable to see opportunities for improvement that are right in front of them.

The best Kanban tools inspire innovation by promoting ownership across the team, for not only how the board is configured, but for how work is visualized and managed as it moves through the team's process.

The beauty and challenge of implementing a new Kanban tool is that it requires the entire team to take ownership over how the board is configured. When implementing a new Kanban tool, teams have to work together to ensure that their new boards accurately reflect their process.

Be sure to dedicate sufficient time and space for implementation of the new Kanban tool. Assigning ownership of a process or workflow to an individual and empowering them to make the changes necessary to improve is sometimes all it takes to rekindle a culture of innovation.

> *Using a set of Kanban principles, teams can truly own their work because they have identified their own improvement opportunities, implemented their own improvement solutions, and executed the work in the way they designed.*

In short, Kanban tools not only reveal savings opportunities that can be passed along to customers in the form of monetary savings, but they can also help teams thrive by making everyone responsible for making the solution their own.

Using Kanban Tools to Boost Productivity

Regardless of size or industry, teams can benefit from using an online Kanban tool to improve alignment, communication, and productivity across the team. Kanban tools help teams automate much of the tracking and productivity analysis that may have taken too much time to do manually, freeing up time to do more value-adding work.

Teams can easily identify ways to maximize resources and delegate tasks to the right people using Kanban reporting tools that help answer questions, such as:

- How long does it take a team to complete one full work cycle?

- Where do challenges usually occur, and how can they be mitigated or eliminated?

- How can the team reduce the amount of time it takes to complete a full work cycle, and how much money would be saved?

- How would changes to one process impact another process downstream?

Once implemented, a Kanban tool can save companies thousands of hours per year in overhead while revealing further savings opportunities that will be passed along to customers.

The benefits of Kanban are far-reaching and continuously discovered as teams work to innovate and compete in the global marketplace. Kanban tools also help build stronger teams by facilitating a sense of ownership over not only what work is completed, but how it is done.

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Rachaelle Lynn, a Certified SAFe Agilist, is a marketing manager and subject matter expert at Planview, a market-leading provider of project portfolio management, lean and agile delivery, project management, and innovation management software. Her experience in diverse B2B and B2C industries continue to drive her interest in the SaaS customer journey. Rachaelle holds a BA in Communication Studies from the University of Florida.

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