Something About Kanban

Improving project delivery with nothing more than a card and a wall

Kanban. Weird word right? But if you are a project sponsor, stakeholder, manager or team member then not only do you need to know about it, it needs to be your new best friend. But here at TeamDynamix we hate jargon so we call Kanban what it really is – a card wall. And in this whitepaper, we want to show you how powerful it can be, and how it can improve how you deliver projects.

Kanban? Card walls? What's all that about?

Let's start by saying that we fully understand the value of waterfall and we embrace this methodology with gusto. But we also know that waterfall is not for everyone and it is definitely not for all projects – hence we would like to turn your attention to Kanban.

Kanban– or as we often call it, "card wall" is a more simplistic approach to organizing work efforts, milestones, tasks and people. You start by identifying the phases of work for any particular task on a project or work item. Let's make it really easy by listing just three:

Not Started	In Progress	Complete
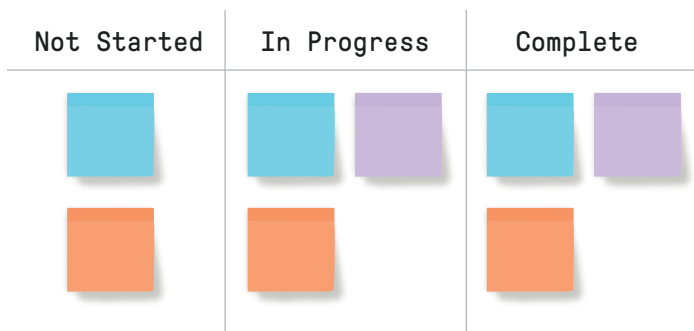
Those headings are obviously simple, they don't need to be explained to anyone. But they convey everything you need – a quick glance and you get it. Those headings are then arranged in columns in chronological order – the earliest on the left and the latest on the right. These represent the 'wall' part of your card wall.

Then we identify the different pieces of work that have to be done and we create a card for each of them. So a card gets created for 'design screens', or 'test performance' or any of the other things that have to be done on your piece of work, your project, or whatever it is you're looking to manage. And then the last step is simply to put those cards into one of the phases of work – add them to the wall. At the start of the project everything is 'not started', then tasks begin to move into 'in progress' and eventually 'complete'. Once everything has moved to complete the work is finished.

Not Started	In Progress	Complete
Task G	Task E	Task B Task A
Task H	Task F Task D	Task C
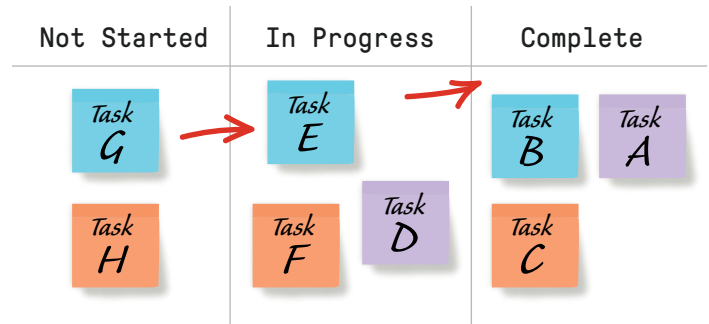
Card walls have become popular recently because they are so straightforward. They can be produced with nothing more complicated than sticky notes on a whiteboard. Yet they immediately convey a lot of information about the project. It's common to put these card walls outside the team's work area so anyone stopping by can immediately see what's going on. And because they are so easy to understand there is no need for them to be analyzed or studied. A sponsor passing by on their way to a meeting can immediately see what's happening. That makes card walls one of the most powerful communication and work management tools available.

13.5%

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Yet in a recent survey we found that only around 13.5% of respondents used Kanban. Why is that? We believe it's simply a lack of awareness – we're sure you're already loving the idea and we haven't even got to the good bits yet.

Beyond the sticky note – software driven card walls

The power of that communication and management can be taken to the next level when it's driven by software. Now you can easily categorize and add detail to the cards – color code them for different types of work, arrange them based on priority, create sub tasks, assign owners, the list goes on. And all of that can be viewed at any level of detail with a simple click. Literally everything you need to know about the project or a single task is right there in a way that can be easily understood. And of course it can be shared just as easily, you don't need to work in the same building to see progress.

Card wall software also makes it easier to manage one of the other powerful elements of card walls – WIP limits. WIP, work in progress, is exactly what it says – the tasks that are currently being worked on. By creating rules that limit the 'in progress' part of the card wall, a project manager can ensure tasks are actually being finished, that

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team members aren't starting a lot of things but not finishing them. These WIP limits can be applied for the overall project, for a particular group, or for an individual. Examples might be that no more than eight tasks can be in progress at any one time, that no individual can own more than two in progress tasks, etc.

Software also makes it easier to manage relationships between tasks, prioritizing work that is blocking other work from starting (dependencies), alerting if tasks have been stuck at one stage of the process for too long, reminding owners to update progress, etc. Effective card wall software retains the simplicity of the sticky note while providing powerful task management, analysis and workflow. That turns a simple communication tool into a powerful way to manage work. And not just typical project-based work, pretty much anything you want.
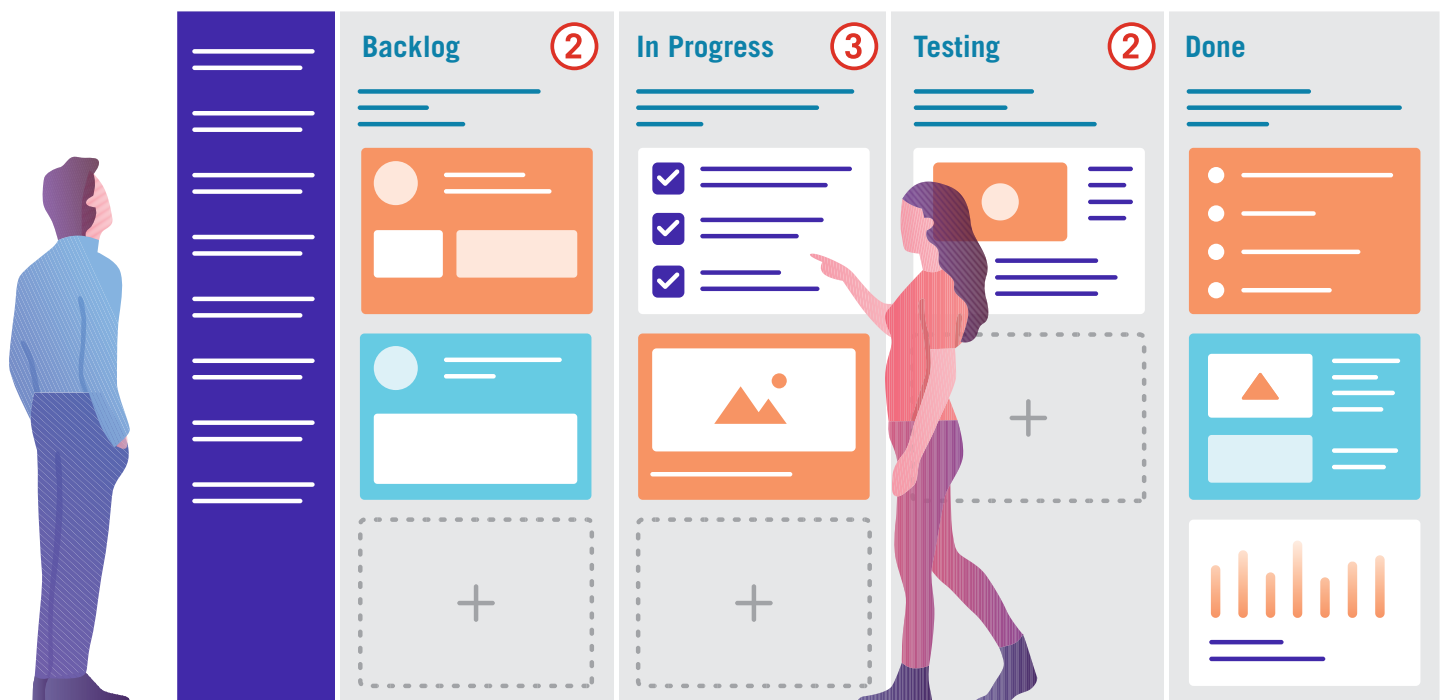
Productivity through card walls

If you don't manage projects on a regular basis the prospect can be daunting. The processes, tools, jargon and complexity of trying to build a traditional project plan create barriers that are simply too difficult to overcome. As a result, areas of the business where formal project management is not mainstream—marketing, HR, facilities management, etc.—don't use structured management approaches. That makes it easier for them to actually get the work done, but it exposes the organization to more risks, likely results in a more expensive and time-consuming process, and makes it far harder to monitor and manage what's happening.

That's one of the reasons why Agile project delivery methods have grown in popularity. They started life almost 20 years ago in software development but are now widespread in many different departments. Agile concepts are even being used at strategic levels of the organization. But even there, the assumption is that teams have been trained on Agile practices and approaches. It's not something immediately accessible to people who are asked to manage a project as a one off.

But card walls are that accessible. They're intuitive for the project manager to build, it's straightforward and quick for the team members to maintain, and it's easy for the stakeholders to review. And if the tool is easy and intuitive then it will be adopted. If it adds value it will continue to be used, and if it improves the success of the work you are doing then it needs to be used. Card walls are all that and more.

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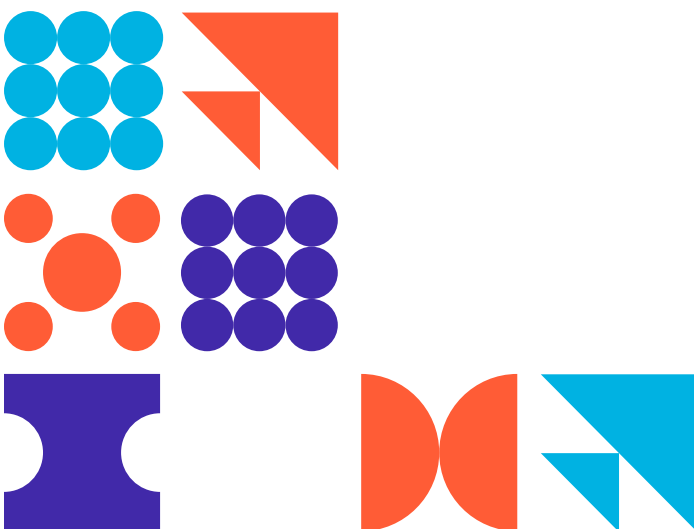
Bridging the gap between project approaches

Kanban was developed by Toyota in the 1940s so the card wall concept isn't new. But it is a tool that is generally associated with Agile project methods today. The lower level of formality and structure made it easier for teams to embrace card walls to track and monitor progress. Agile teams liked the fact that it could be managed with very little effort, and stakeholders liked the fact they could understand what was happening without any specialist training around Agile. In fact, for some organizations, Kanban is the only Agile method they use – not just for communicating progress, but for managing all of the work.

That has become possible because card walls act as a translation function between Agile and general business management. That translation capability has resulted in traditional, waterfall-based project teams embracing card walls in increasing numbers. Project managers don't want to spend time producing status reports and then interpreting those reports for stakeholders. And while modern project management software can produce effective automated reports, it can't handle the context setting and explanations that different stakeholder groups need. But card walls can bridge that gap, and traditional project teams are rapidly recognizing that.

With card walls being used by Agile teams, by traditional teams, and by groups who only complete projects on an occasional basis, organizations now have access to a single

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tool that can be used for all project work, regardless of where or how it is carried out. That has never happened before and it creates tremendous opportunities. Project management offices (PMOs) now have a common language to communicate around all projects. Not only are the barriers to integrating Agile into a typically traditional PMO removed, those PMOs can now also incorporate one-off project work areas. This provides the business with what it really needs – a complete picture of the work that is being done.

That in turn drives better decision making, improved resource planning and management, and greater visibility into the options for approving and scheduling additional initiatives. Essentially the business is able to generate a better return on its limited investment budget for projects. And all because of a communication tool that couldn't be simpler.

Starting with card walls

That simplicity, the defining characteristic of card walls is also why they present a no risk approach for your organization. You don't need to invest time and money prototyping a solution, you simply need to ask a team to develop a basic card wall for their project – a task that will take the team less than an hour, probably a lot less. And then you simply maintain it for a week or so and see what the reaction of different stakeholders are. It's almost guaranteed that their reaction will be immediately positive. No one will tell you it's a waste of time or that it doesn't explain what's going on.

You can expect feedback about how to improve the model, but that's to be expected – it's a first attempt put together in just a few minutes. But if stakeholders are already thinking about what makes it better, then that means they've already accepted the concept as something that works for them. And if you move to a digital card wall then not only is the process of improving and adding elements remarkably easy, you can develop a standard template that all projects can use. That way you have common color schemes, structures and approaches.

If you aren't using card walls today then you may want to consider how you can incorporate these powerful walls into your projects. They are, in fact, so straightforward that you can be using them tomorrow – literally. If you are a PMO guru and you are at your wits end with attempts to get your enterprise onboard with project management – this is an excellent foray. It is manageable and regardless of role, the concepts are easy to understand and embrace.

Consider how you can Kanban today.

TeamDynamix

About TeamDynamix

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Project Management Institute

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Through global advocacy, collaboration, education and research, we work to prepare more than three million professionals around the world for the Project Economy: the coming economy in which work, and individuals, are organized around projects.

Celebrating our 50th anniversary in 2019, we work in nearly every country around the world to advance careers, improve organizational success and further mature the project management profession through globally-recognized standards, certifications, communities, resources, tools, academic research, publications, professional development courses and networking opportunities.

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