

Kanban

Originally developed at Toyota in the 1950s to steer production, Kanban is used today by project managers in different fields to make projects faster and more efficient. It seeks to reduce lead times, the amount of work in process and to secure a continuous workflow. Work items are visualized on a 'Kanban Board' to give the team an overview of the progress and process. Work is pulled as capacity permits, rather than work being pushed into the process when requested.

The most popular way of doing this is by manually advancing sticky notes in different colors from 'To-Do' to 'Doing' to 'Done' columns on large whiteboards. Today there are also web-based solutions for Kanban Boards, but traditional whiteboards are often preferred in order to visualize the ongoing workflow for everyone. The sticky notes symbolize a task that is broken down into a manageable

amount of work, mostly between two or three hours. A daily 15-minute stand-up meeting informs every team member about the current status of all tasks and offers an opportunity to talk about it. The level of detail is down to the users, but in general the Kanban Board should not contain too many parallel tasks. This way, it is ensured that tasks flow smoothly and without delay over the board. Kanban's flexibility allows it to be overlaid onto existing workflows, systems and processes without disrupting what is already successfully in place.

Kanban can be easily implemented in any type of organization. The method is designed to meet minimal resistance and thus encourages small, continuous, and incremental changes to the current process.

(Anderson, 2010; Kanbanize, 2018; Sugimori et al., 1977)

WORKING WITH KANBAN AT COMDIRECT

Given the fact that agility is closely tied to start-up mentality, digitalization, and speed of innovation, becoming more agile was a natural progression for comdirect. The online bank started its business 24 years ago but still retains its disruptive start-up mentality today. Disruption and change are ingrained in its business strategy and looking for structures and concepts that decrease the 'product-to-market' time is essential to its success.

With this in mind, comdirect started a change program with four pilot units in 2014 in order to become more agile. The change program focuses especially on executives and teams with the aim of developing a different concept of leadership based on coaching and enabling staff. The process was supported by an external coach who introduced the pilot units to agile tools such as Kanban.



One of the pilots was corporate communications – a team with ten employees. The initial impetus was to become faster and more efficient in dealing with the tasks at hand. The goal was for every colleague within CC to be able to handle every job. The team decided to work in a more topic-related fashion instead of focusing on different channels. Tasks are allocated following the pull instead of push principle: Self-determined product owners declare themselves responsible for upcoming topics and build their teams. The aim is to initiate more self-organization, transparency, and trust.

The team uses a mixture of different Kanban Boards to organize and prioritize its work: an overall board for the whole team, project boards that are linked to the departmental boards, and in some cases personal Kanban boards managed by the team members themselves. The overall Kanban Board is the heart of the team office and daily stand-up meetings keep everybody informed. The change process was supported by moving into an open-plan office.



»Stop starting – start finishing!«

Annette Siragusano is Head of Corporate Communications at comdirect bank AG, one of the leading direct banks in Germany (net income of € 71.544 million in 2017 | 1,450 employees). Since three years, Siragusano and her team have been working with Kanban. Comdirect has invested heavily in digital technologies, publishing the first online banking app and launching a “start-up garage” for financial technology start-ups.



What was your motivation to start the agile journey with your team at comdirect?

As a direct bank we are especially hit by the digital transformation. The speed of innovation in the field of direct/online banking is extreme. The same holds true for the communication department. The speed of communication and the number of channels are increasing every year. It was obvious that we had to collaborate more efficiently and effectively. We are a small team. Therefore, flexibility in terms of tasks and topics is very important for us. So, I would say it was initially both a top-down initiated process and a bottom-up process.

What were your biggest challenges along the way?

The process towards more agility has its ups and downs. While in the beginning people are motivated and exited, this usually declines when they understand that agility has its downsides, too.

Working with Kanban and Scrum techniques means that employees have to have more self-initiative and have to work more transparently and collaboratively. Not everyone is cut out for that. Some people need more convincing than others. Here, executives need patience but should stay determined about their course. Most problems work themselves out when establishing a culture of feedback, failure tolerance, and trust.

What tips can you give your colleagues that have just started this journey?

First of all, just do it! It is easier when you start small. Although ‘islands of agility’ have their drawbacks, too, for us it worked. Communication has the general advantage that it is often relatively independent from other functions and units. Important is that your people understand your goal and share your sense of urgency. You have to explain why this approach is superior to others.

FURTHER READINGS

Anderson, D. (2010). Kanban: Successful evolutionary change for your technology business. Seattle, WA: Blue Hole Press.
Kanbanize (2018). Kanban explained for beginners. <https://kanbanize.com/kanban-resources/getting-started/what-is-kanban/>.

