A Kanban card is a visual representation of a work item. Translated from Japanese, it literally means visual (kan) card (ban). It is a core element of the Kanban system as it represents work that has been requested or is already in progress.

Think of Kanban cards as sticky notes on a whiteboard to represent their work items. As bugs are corrected and features added, the team moves the sticky notes through columns labeled Prioritized, Design, Development, Testing, Blocked, and Done.

Each bin of parts had a Kanban card attached that served as an alert signal to workers whenever stock dropped below the quantity indicated on the card. When that happened, it triggered the replenishment process, and the factory sent the empty bin with its Kanban card to the supplier.

By referencing the card—which included information about the part specifications, required quantity, and expected delivery time—the supplier could quickly fill the order and send the restocked bin with its Kanban card back to the factory floor, just in time to keep the production cycle going.

The overall construct is brilliant and still applicable, except NO MORE KANBAN CARDS.

Paper Kanban simply does not work in today’s global, 24/7, fast-paced manufacturing environment, with suppliers and customers located on every continent. COVID-19 has rendered the manual Kanban card system obsolete. Demonstrating agility in this new remote working environment is central to achieving success in the rapidly changing pandemic supply chain.
Identifying the parts and materials that are suitable for Kanban is a critical first step. Correctly determining the sizing parameters for a Kanban system and mapping existing on-hand and on-order inventory to an initial Kanban loop size must follow. Similarly, bulk resizing a Kanban based on demand, lead time, or lot-size changes must take place for a successful paperless Kanban. Transparency to data and metrics central to supply-chain processes is data-driven. Paper-based Kanban processes do not offer reports and analytics, both during COVID-19 nor in a return to work safely process. Kanban leaders have been using spreadsheets to make initial calculations and ongoing changes for decades. There is not possibility of scaling this process with tens of thousands of parts and suppliers and when key decision makers are working remotely.

The death of Kanban cards in a return to work COVID-19 process

Kanban is not dead; the cards requiring manual touches is inefficient and perhaps dangerous. Besides planning and tracking the strategic initiatives, programs and projects, digital or e-Kanban (electronic Kanban) helps manufacturers deal with specific functionality at the organizational level.

At the organizational level, leadership must prioritize the right programs based on the real-time data needed for these Kanban projects.

Using the extensive visualization hierarchy modeling in e-Kanban combined with statistical modeling and forecasting capabilities, a new efficiency level is achieved. These powerful insights are derived from using these data predictively, rather than lagging data from other solutions like ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning.)

e-Kanban is alive and well and needed more during the pandemic than ever before.

Author Profile

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