

Definitions for *Kanban Guide*

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Context

Some definitions in this document and in related content are new and/or differ from those of their creators and/or seminal publishers. The aim of this document is not to redefine words, rewrite history, or be the ultimate judge of what words mean; rather it is to provide alignment for ease of use of Kanban Guide and related content. The definitions are not listed in pedagogical order, as they are for reference purposes.

Definitions

Cycle Time

For Kanban Guide, Cycle Time is the amount of elapsed time between when a Work Item started and when a Work Item finished. The Definition of Workflow has at least one start point and one endpoint and there could be multiple start points and multiple endpoints.

Typically, the calendar day interval between a start point and delivery to an endpoint plus one day will avoid zero cycle times. Cycle Time refers to elapsed days regardless of weekends/public holidays. There can be several Cycle Times on a Definition of Workflow. One might differentiate types of Cycle Time, such as service time, flow time, lead time, time-in-progress, time-in-process; Kanban Guide does not.

Explicit Policy

“A policy is a set of ideas or plans that is used as a basis for making decisions, especially in politics, economics, or business.” (Collinsdictionary.com, 2019, 1)

An Explicit Policy makes assumptions explicit, e.g., how the Kanban system members define the moment when Work Items starts/moves. The Kanban system members should create as many Explicit Policies as they deem necessary.

The Kanban Board should display all relevant Explicit Policies or show Kanban system members how to find the Explicit Policies. A minimum set of Explicit Policies is necessary to optimize flow, which usually means supporting the assumptions made in Little’s Law for (discovery &) delivery (Vacanti, D., 2019, 2). There are times when Kanban system members can (and sometimes should) breach Explicit Policies by exception.

An Explicit Policy can also be referred to as a “workflow policy” or “policy”.

Flow

Flow is the speed and smoothness of the delivery of Work Items through the Definition of Workflow.-Achieving flow is a balancing act. Kanban system members should optimize value delivery, actively manage WIP, and simultaneously support the assumptions embedded in queue management theory, such as Little’s Law (Little, 2019).

Good flow feels like a well-oiled machine. The Kanban system members enjoy a sense of calm and get more work done with minimal stress. Bad flow feels like working in a chaotic environment where Work Items are rotting in WIP, delivery is random, and the Kanban system members are stressed, overburdened, or idle.

kanban

A *kanban* (literally meaning *visual signal* in Japanese) is a visual cue that triggers you to replenish/select/start or pull/move a Work Item. For example, the appearance of an open WIP slot on a Kanban Board is a signal to move a Work Item into that slot. Cards represent Work Items, and blank slots are signals (kanbans) to replenish/select/start or pull/move.

Kanban Board

“Kanban Board” is a visual representation of a Definition of Workflow for knowledge work. It must meet the minimum requirements for the Definition of Workflow in Kanban Guide. “Kanban Board” is a colloquial evolution for knowledge work from the 20th-century manufacturing relation “andon display”, meaning lantern display (visual signals). The value of the Kanban Board is that it makes the Definition of Workflow transparent, it alerts Kanban system members when hidden or unplanned work emerges, and/or when work in the Definition of Workflow is blocked. It should be accessible to the Kanban system members at all times.

A Kanban Board can be used at any organizational level; Work Items on different organizational levels tend to have natural degrees of granularity.

Throughput

Throughput is the number of Work Items finished per unit of time. Note the measurement of throughput is the exact count of Work Items. It is the delivery rate of Work Items to an

endpoint in the Definition of Workflow. Throughput is calculated by the number of Work Items to arrive at the endpoint per time period (e.g., per hour, per day, per week), whether completed or kicked out of the process. Just as there can be more than one Cycle Time per Definition of Workflow, there can be more than one Throughput per Definition of Workflow.

Value

“The value of something such as a quality, attitude, or method is its importance or usefulness. If you place a particular value on something, that is the importance or usefulness you think it has.” (Collinsdictionary.com, 2019, 2)

In Kanban, Kanban system members consider customer/end-user value (providing something useful) and knowledge value (learning), which has the benefit of reducing risk. Kanban system members could also consider how to make the world a more sustainable place, known as societal value. Kanban system members could also consider organizational value.

Customer and End-user Value

Customers and end-users attempt to forecast a positive impact on their worlds as potential value, and later confirm it as value. At a minimum, outcomes should arise, positive or negative. Activities and outputs are insufficient. Frequency of impact is what teams should aim for.

Societal Value

Outcomes towards sustainable development goals are referred to as societal value. The generation of societal value requires political will, purposeful passion, focus, mental energy, and a fresh approach.

Knowledge Value

Value may consider the management of risk, such as the cost of doing nothing, opportunity cost, cost of delay (Reinertsen, 2009), cost of discovery, cost of delivery, erosion of failure demand (Seddon, 2019), the erosion of technical debt (Alliance, Letouzey and Whelan, 2019) etc..

Learning/acquiring knowledge about a risk can lower it, or at the least, make it visible. A proof of concept for a solution may not actually work. Let's assume a Work Item is completed according to our Workflow Policies, and it is released.

Discovering whether the Work Item works or not via proof of concept is a form of

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knowledge value. Validated learning by experimenting with/on customers/end-users is also a form of knowledge value.

More often than not, knowledge value/learning can be seen as the opposite of risk. How one includes the management of risk does not matter, as long as it is sufficiently addressed in a timely and proactive manner. Organizational agility is not simply about adaptiveness for delivering value, it's also about avoiding waste, the waste of building something that should never have been built.

Organizational Value

Value may consider improvement in the organization's reputation/health/potential, caused by a discovery of new products/services/customers, an increase in effectiveness/efficiency, an increase in market share, or an increase in the inspiration of employees/customers/shareholders.

WIP

Any Work Items between a start point(included in the count) and an endpoint(excluded from the count) are considered *work in progress*. In Kanban Guide, WIP stands for Work in Progress. WIP refers to Work Items that have passed a start point and have not yet arrived at an endpoint, and have not been kicked out of the process. As there may be multiple start points and endpoints in the Definition of Workflow, there may be multiple versions of WIP for the Definition of Workflow.

Blocking can happen for many reasons. It could be the result of waiting for someone to solve a problem, deliver a dependency, or provide information, for example. A blocked Work Item could also result from moving to work on something else (production downtime, change in priority), or of waiting for something to happen, such as a law to pass, or office space to be ready. It is important to have clear signals and conversations when Work Items are not active.

Some argue WIP should stand for *work in process*. Proponents in that camp contend that some work in progress is actually blocked, queueing, or otherwise waiting, so the word *progress* is misleading. The same, though, could be said of *work in process*. Kanban system members should recognize when a Work Item is stalled. Therefore, Kanban Guide™ is going for the psychological factor.

Work

Work is a collection of Work Items, primarily Work Items that have started in the Definition of Workflow, but it could include unstarted Work Items.

Work Item

A Work Item holds the potential for value. To realize that value, the Work Item must get released. For example, a release could set you on the path to understanding customer value or you could derive knowledge value from the release of a proof of concept. People use words like *theme*, *epic*, *feature*, *story*, and *product backlog item* to capture the different levels of granularity of a Work Item. Kanban Guide uses the single term *Work Item*. Whatever one calls it is fine as long as it is delivering potential value.

Only Work Items should be WIP limited. If Work Items do not deliver value, they are fake. Limiting WIP for fake Work Items reduces the collaborative effort to deliver potential value; people focus less on the common objective and deliver stuff, not value. The result of using fake Work Items is that the Kanban system delivers less value, discover/delivers value less often, and negative value is more likely. Examples of negative value are failure demand (Seddon, 2019), technical debt (Alliance, Letouzey and Whelan, 2019) and the reverse impact to what was intended.

Work Item, also known as Item, can also be referred to as “batch” or “ticket” as long as the above definition still applies. Beware of fake Work Items.

Work Item Type

A categorization for a Work Item, often but not necessarily signaled via color, symbol, avatar or swimlane. Examples include brand, customer, feature, bug, project work, operational work, problem statement, hypothesis, research, and experiment. Work Item Type is not to be confused with class-of-service such as, for example, standard, (real) fixed date, expedite or intangible.

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