Just a Kanban Girl in an Agile World

The last several blogs have brought up some exciting topics, haven't they? Perhaps some of these terms are familiar, but not solid in practice at every organization. Some are big ideas while others are smaller. Which one is right and what works with certain kinds of organizations? The big answer is "it depends" … or was that "all of them?"

There are so many practices for *getting stuff done*, and they started way before Agile. In The Skinny on Lean Concepts, one of the first ideas came in 1913 that completely changed the automotive industry. Even though this idea is more than a century old, it still holds value. It's actually still in practice today. With that in mind, keeping an open mind and piece together what works best for the present organization is essential. The Goonies say, "Never say die," and we say, "Never stop learning." We are learning creatures, constantly evolving and unafraid to consider a better way.

Another recent blog, Agile: What is it really?, revealed that Agile is actually a collection of values and principles. All of those tools associated with and often labeled "Agile" aren't exclusive to Agile. This frees them to be used in many different environments. At the same time, it is perfectly okay to bring in tools from other practices because Agile is unbiased as long as the values and principles are prioritized.

Enter Kanban

Kanban was first brought into manufacturing with Toyota, which got the idea from a supermarket. In the supermarket, the missing product was replenished when inventory was low or all items were "pulled" from the shelf. This was the birth of the "pull system," when inventory is provided only when needed, providing the shortest possible lead times.

Fast-forward to another evolution of Kanban: visualizing the progress of a production line or process. The practice is also seen in Agile and Scrum projects as a means of displaying the flow of work and current status. The value of Kanban boards is visibility to the team, leadership, and even the customer in some cases. Everyone knows what is pending and what is in progress (compliments from our friends at The Forge Lean Six Sigma Training).
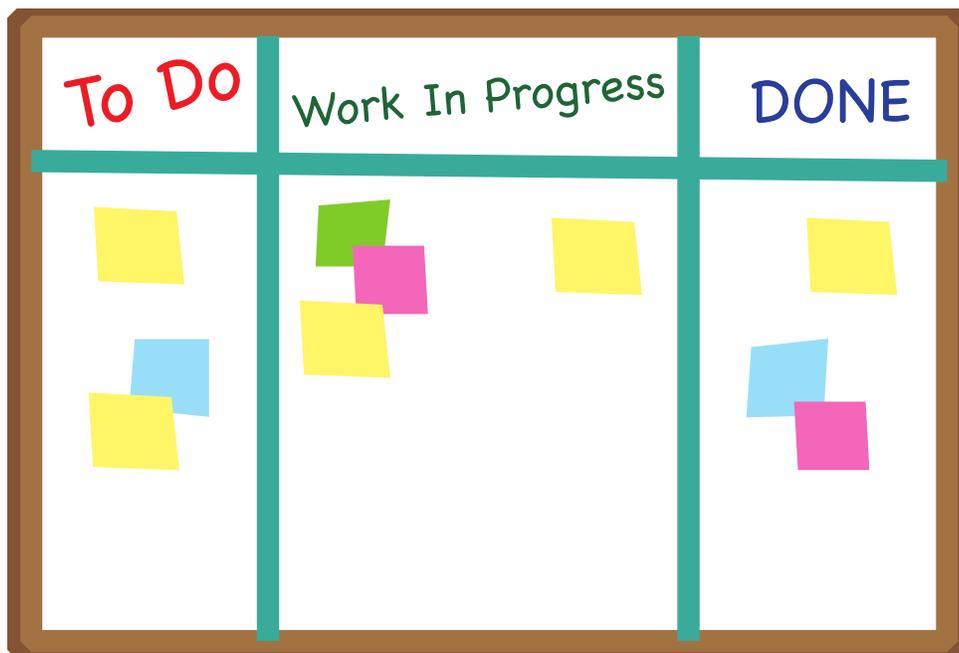
(Snip under the image is that the columns in the board can be customized for how the team works)

Kanban practices apply to all environments to bring value to a process, from manufacturing to customer service and everything in-between, including software development. The key is visibility and maximizing efficiency. Using the Kanban board enables the team to improve their flow continuously.

Kanban vs. Sprint

The typical sprint event involves a defined goal with its accompanying tasks to be done in a defined time frame. All parties involved, developer to tester, and even the stakeholders where appropriate, getting the tasks through to completion. In between sprint events is a project manager planning the next one. There are a LOT of hours spent on a project just for planning, but what if that can be reduced or even eliminated?

Bring in a Kanban "pull" process where developers have their backlog present and visible. The developers can pull in the next task as soon as the code they were working tests successfully, either with a tool or a partner in paired programming, something we put into practice at IT Efficiency Consulting. The common practice is first to pick the "low hanging fruit," being the easiest and shortest code, building momentum quickly.

Kanban is nimbler, especially with a project with varied priorities. Shifting tasks on a Kanban team is much easier than altering a sprint event that is usually more rigid and precisely planned. This fluid movement also enables the team to make quick changes as a means of improvement as soon as an opportunity to improve presents itself.

Playing it SAFE, a new evolution

Just as people start taking sides on the best frameworks, methodologies and tools to use for any kind of project, there is a new evolution. The Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) has adopted a multitude of tools and practices including Lean, Agile, DevOps, and Systems Thinking. Their core belief is worthy of a smile: Better software and systems make the world a better place. SAFe has crossed lines between the different practices so much that they made their own certification. SAFe introduces the Five Core Competencies of the Lean Enterprise that are critical to achieving and sustaining a competitive advantage in an increasingly digital age:

Lean-Agile Leadership – Advancing and applying Lean-Agile leadership skills

Team and Technical Agility – Driving technical practices including Built-in Quality, Behavior-Driven development (BDD), Agile testing, Test-Driven Development (TDD), and more

DevOps and Release on Demand – Building the Continuous Delivery Pipeline, and implementing DevOps and Release and Demand

Business Solutions and Lean Systems Engineering – Building the largest software applications and cyber-physical solutions

Lean Portfolio Management – Executing portfolio vision and strategy formulation, chartering portfolios, creating the Vision, Lean budgets and Guardrails, as well as portfolio prioritization, and roadmapping

(caption that this came from https://www.scaledagileframework.com/about/)

Who's the winner?

Is there even a winner here? Gauge the corporate culture. Sprints work well with rigid schedules. However, one wrench thrown at the plan subjects the project to considerable delay. While sprints are often associated with Agile teams, they are not exclusive. Remember that Agile is a collection of values and principles and not actual practices. In reading the principles, Kanban supports the principles:

- Agile processes to support a consistent development pace
- Simplicity
- Self-organizing teams encourage great architectures, requirements, an designs
- Regular reflections on how to become more effective

So, in essence, there was never competition between Agile and Kanban. Sprints and Kanban are both practical approaches, but Kanban is nimbler and can accommodate change by the customer or the team.

IT Efficiency Consulting is a leader in optimizing software development projects using proven techniques, technologies and hardware. Our proven force multipliers improve productivity and reduce defects while simultaneously raising the morale of the team members. How can that be done? Contact us and we will tell you how.