

KANBAN METHOD TRANSFORMS NET-A-PORTER TECH TEAM'S WORKFLOW

NET-A-PORTER, an online retailer and curator of luxury fashion brands, became an influencer of a different sort when its technology team adopted the Kanban Method. The team often struggled to deliver quality work while operating under the requirement to deliver things within a biweekly timeframe. Kanban boosted the team's ability to deliver quality work while also creating a more relaxed, collaborative, and purpose-driven work environment.

Kanban is a powerful management approach that, unlike other solutions, doesn't prescribe a fixed set of behaviors or actions. Instead, it encourages continuous improvement by enabling teams to start where they are and improve from there using techniques such as **visualizing workflow and limiting work in progress**. Kanban can be easily integrated with Scrum, making it an ideal tool for teams to improve important processes.

The Challenge

Founded in London at the turn of the century, NET-A-PORTER is a leading online platform for high-end fashion and beauty products that generates global sales through its interactive website and shopping apps. Early on, the fashion retailer had a technology team that lacked structured processes. The absence of clear roles and standardized procedures created inefficiencies and challenges in delivering customer delight.

Recognizing the need for change, the team initiated a shift towards Agile methodologies and adopted Scrum, the agile framework that organizes deliverable work within time-boxed iterations, or sprints. The move marked a significant shift in the way the team managed its work, creating defined roles and implementing sprint planning and review meetings that added more structure to its team. The team

adopted two-week sprints and found itself increasingly efficient and motivated to meet release deadlines. Scrum also introduced coordination challenges between this team and other teams at the firm.

The fixed iterations and the pressure to meet sprint commitments created stress and led to shortcuts that compromised the quality of work. Additionally, NET-A-PORTER's practice of implementing firm-wide releases every three weeks disrupted the IT team's workflow, making it difficult to meet commitments.

The Solution

To address these new challenges, the team decided to explore an alternative approach that supported adaptation to change common in many organizations. They turned to the Kanban Method, a more flexible and adaptive method for managing work that supported adapting to

ongoing changes. They saw Kanban as a way to address the limitations and frustrations they faced with Scrum.

They started their evolutionary journey by mapping their existing workflow and visualizing it on a Kanban board. Their initial board featured ten columns, each representing a major activity in their workflow. This board helped them gain a clear view of their process and identify areas where they could improve.

Setting work in progress Limits

Setting work in progress limits on each column of the Kanban board was crucial in maintaining the team's focus and reducing multitasking. The team set relatively low work in progress limits at first to encourage a smoother workflow and to prevent overburdening team members. The board served as a real-time

representation of the team's work, ensuring it accurately reflected their work status.

The team's journey with Kanban was marked by ongoing evolutionary changes made to their process. They adjusted their board, changed work in progress limits, and introduced buffer columns to address bottlenecks. Daily "stand-up" meetings became more focused on the team's work rather than on those of individuals, leading to better communication and issue resolution. The team also began delivering work faster with improved quality.

Kanban introduced evolutionary change as well as metrics and data-driven insights that were lacking when using Scrum. The team actively measured lead times, cycle times, and the flow of its work, gaining a much better understanding of its performance. The team also introduced a monthly survey to help it gauge its collective happiness, revealing a positive trend of increased team collaboration and job satisfaction.

The Results

The technology team's adoption of Kanban had a big impact on their ability to deliver value to internal stakeholders and meet firm-wide

releases. They followed up with their colleagues on other teams and interviewed them to better understand their pain points and worked to evolve the processes that affected them. This resulted in significant time savings across the organization, enhancing productivity while also reducing the cost to deliver the technology NET-A-PORTER needed to serve its customers.

With their enhanced delivery capabilities and confidence in Kanban, the technology team began discussing the possibility of continuous deployment. This would make it possible to deploy code independently of release cycles, further improving the team's ability to deliver valuable work internally. Lead time variability presented a challenge, but the team was optimistic about the prospect of continuous deployment.

The technology team's journey demonstrates the power of adaptability and evolutionary change. By evolving their Scrum with Kanban, the team achieved a more flexible and collaborative work environment, enhanced stakeholder satisfaction, and improved efficiency. Not only is the technology team happier with its performance, but their efforts have also clearly affected the performance of other teams within the company. The technology team's experience

serves as a valuable case study for organizations seeking to evolve and adapt their way of working while reducing internal costs and providing value sooner to customers.

EVOLUTIONARY, NOT REVOLUTIONARY

"Start with what you do now" and improve upon it! We respect the existing business, its processes, and its capabilities. We seek to improve through safe-to-try evolutionary means. No reorganizations. No one gets a new job title, role, or responsibilities. We respect the identity of the organization, its employees, and groups.

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Kanban University offers accreditation for Kanban trainers and consultants, a professional designation for Kanban coaches, and certification for Kanban practitioners.



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