Kanban
University

FROM ONE STAR REVIEWS TO FIVE:
MOBILE.DE'S KANBAN JOURNEY

Mobile.de, one of the first online marketplaces for buying and selling vehicles in Germany, wasn't a runaway success when it came to their iPhone app. Ralf Tomczak, mobile.de's chief technology officer, was shocked at how many app downloads were followed by harsh user reviews. "We knew our first mobile application could be better," he said. Thus began Mobile. de's evolutionary journey through Kanban, propelling its app from one star to five star reviews.

The Challenge

Mobile.de was established in 1996 and acquired by eBay eight years later. The acquisition fueled the company's growth, forcing it to scale up to meet increased user demand. With so much more to manage, mobile.de's development teams knew they had to change how they managed their work to maintain momentum.

Realizing their mobile app needed a significant overhaul, the company's app developers set to work on implementing a new approach.As it happens, the mobile domain was gaining prominence just as Agile practices were starting to emerge. Following the advice of German consulting company IT-Agile, mobile.de embraced Agile practices, particularly Scrum, to enhance productivity and team commitment.

Scrum helped the teams become more efficient, but a few things seemed to be missing in the new Agile reality: a free flow of ideas, a clear picture of all ongoing projects, and the important combination of both a viable plan and predictable product delivery.

The Solution

To address these gaps, the company introduced Kanban to compliment their existing work with Scrum. The app development team, with the help of external coaches, successfully implemented practices that helped them visualize knowledge work and evolve their processes to enhance the overall flow of work. This was especially helpful as the team, like so many other teams at the time, had limited mobile development experience.

Adopting Kanban practices helped to prioritize transparency and communication over detailed plans.

Kanban is a powerful management approach that, unlike other solutions, doesn't prescribe a fixed set of behaviors oractions. Instead, it encourages continuous improvement by enabling teams to start where they are and improve from thereusing techniques such as visualizing workflow and limiting work in progress. The Kanban Method scales across an entire organization by introducing it into one service or product line at a time.

Visualizing the Work

Creating a Kanban board, with only two columns — planned and ongoing — helped provide direction to daily stand-up meetings and weekly planning sessions. The team embraced small, releasable work items and focused on creating a tailor-made backend to support the company's expected exponential growth. The way the team managed their work continuously evolved over time.The column names, the number of tickets per column, the people present at or moderating those daily meetings — nothing was ever constant, and it gave the team a feeling of freedom. With each change, the team improved the flow and quality of the product.

Working through "Epics"

By 2012, the Android operating system had already gained significant momentum in the marketplace. More and more smartphone brands were adopting it, and the user base was substantial.

As more developers were added to the mobile development team, they realized the need for a broader perspective. More meetings or

definitive plans were not the answer in an industry defined by constant change. So, the team introduced the concept of "epics," in which various app features (or stories) are bundled under a common theme. This work sometimes spanned multiple teams and two-week sprints.

Eventually, epics provided a way for the team to control their work-in-progress and multitasking. Epics also became a success and validation metric and a way to evaluate the return on investment.

To provide a sense of direction and motivation, the team introduced a "vision" column on the Kanban board, indicating the concept phase of development. As the scope expanded to cover iOS, Android, and Mobile.de's web presence, three separate Kanban boards were introduced to manage different products.

Evolving Quality

With a growing number of developers and limited staff for quality assurance, the team soon faced bottlenecks. As part of its retrospective meetings, the team reevaluated quality assurance and introduced changes. One successful change involved developers testing their own work during manual testing sessions. Another change involved an experiment with car dealers. The experiment focused on rapid validation of ideas and features with vehicle marketplace dealers. This, too, was a success for everyone involved as the product evolved at a much faster pace with greater alignment towards customer needs.

The Transformation

Over the course of just three years, mobile.de's mobile development team evolved into a dynamic well aligned force within the business. The adoption of Kanban principles and practices empowered them to overcome obstacles, and they approached redesigns of operating system updates with abounding confidence. The team excelled at delivering for customers mobile technology and they developed an evolutionary capability to experiment on the product level for their customers.

VISUAL MODELS
Knowledge work is largely intangible. Kanban uses visual models such as boards and metrics to "unhide" work in progress. This creates visibility into status and a single point of truth for collaboration.

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.

About Kanban University

Kanban University works to assure the highest quality coaching and certified training in Kanban for knowledge work and service work worldwide. Our Accredited Kanban Consultants™, Accredited Kanban Trainers™, and Kanban Coaching Professionals™ follow the Kanban Method for evolutionary organizational change.

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

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