

# Introduction to Kanban Boards: Making Work Visible and Managing Flow



- Practical introduction to visualize work, limit overload, and improve delivery flow



- The problem: hidden work, constant switching, unclear priorities, everything feels urgent



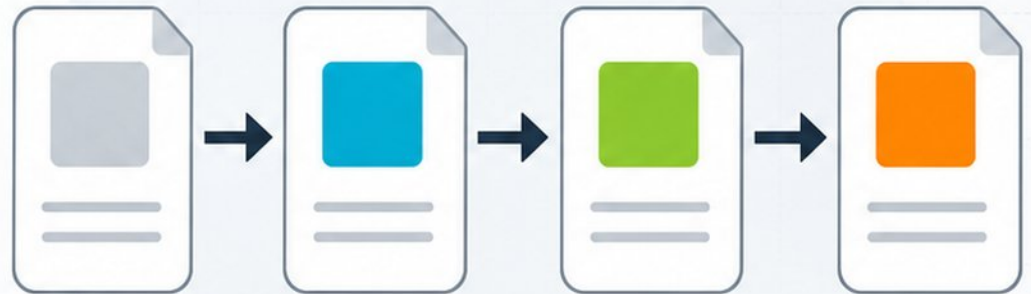
- Core promise: visualize workflow, limit WIP, manage flow for predictable delivery



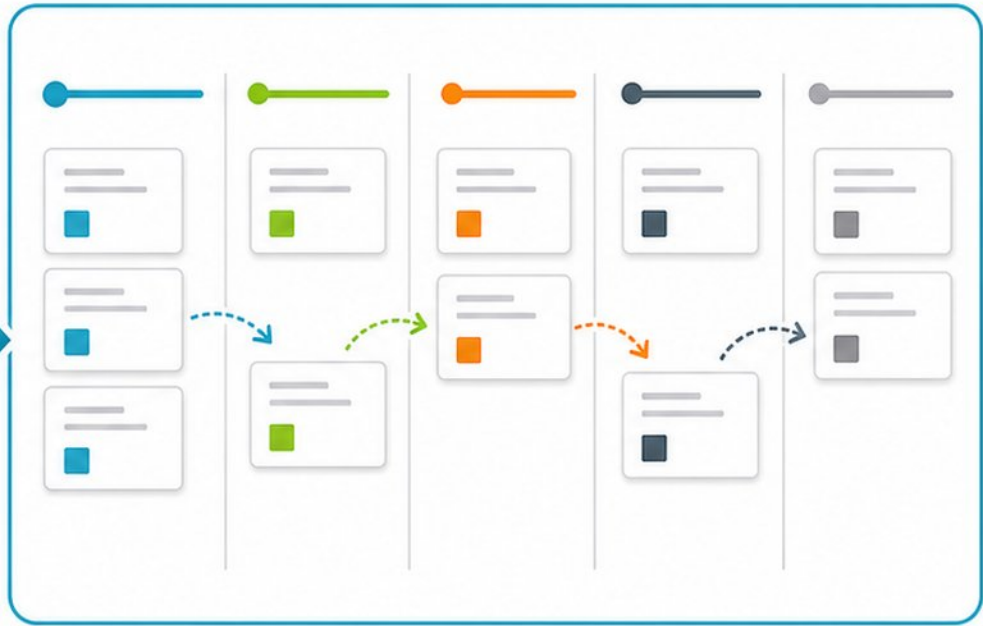
- Origins: Toyota's JIT signaling (1950s) to knowledge work adaptation at Microsoft and Corbis (mid-2000s)



- Outcomes: reduced lead times, fewer bottlenecks, better focus, shared status visibility



# Why Visualizing Work Matters



Invisible queues, overloaded specialists, and missed handoffs



Work falls through cracks without clear status visibility



Every task becomes a card; every stage becomes a column



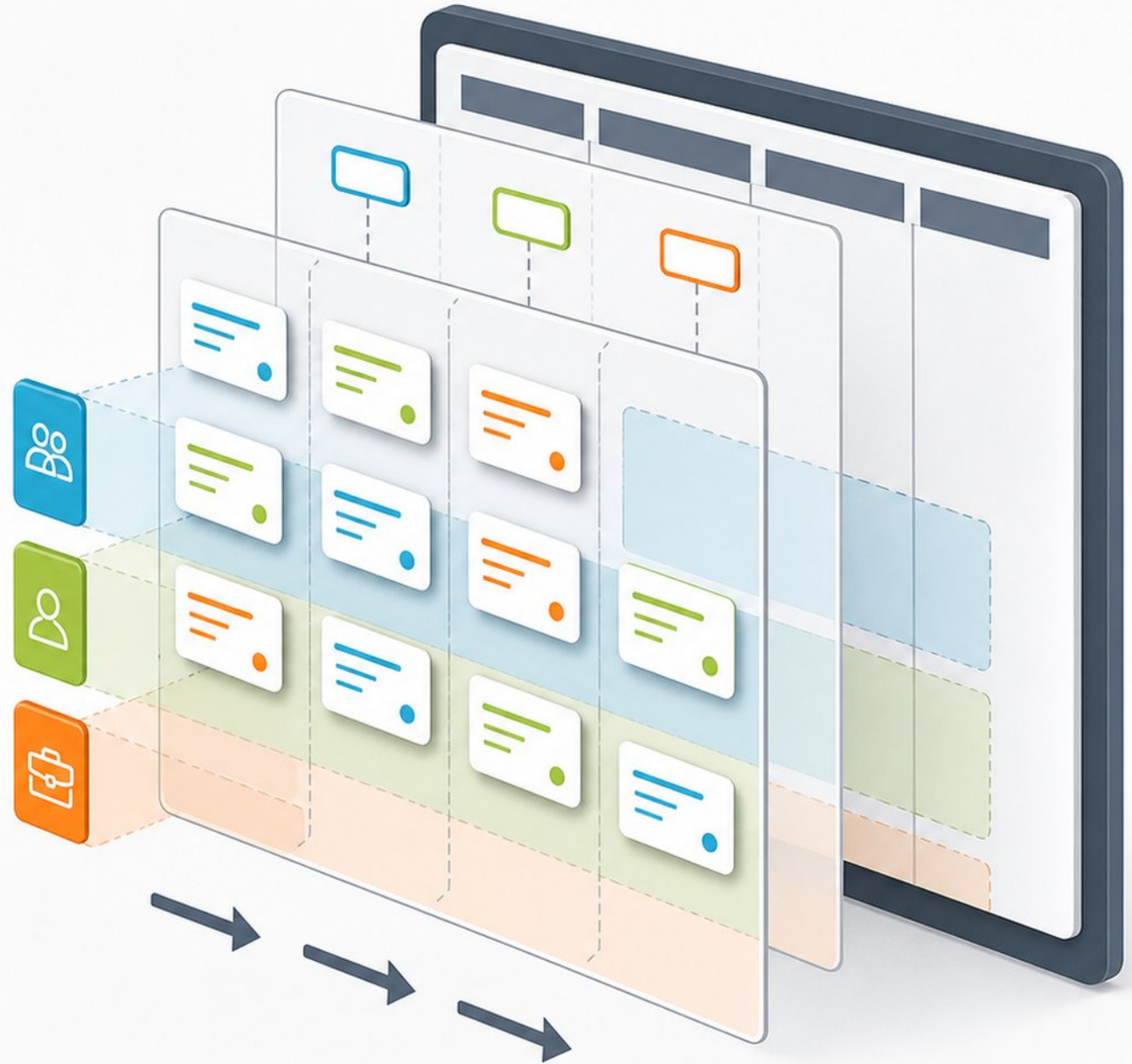
Shift from push to pull: work moves only when capacity exists



A marketing team found 70% of tasks stuck waiting for approvals

# What Is a Kanban Board? Core Components

- Cards, columns, and WIP limits track work through every stage
- Cards: individual tasks; columns: workflow stages; swimlanes: horizontal grouping
- Physical boards: high visibility; digital tools: automation, metrics, remote access
- Commitment point starts lead time; delivery point ends it
- A board is a living model of your process, not just a to-do list

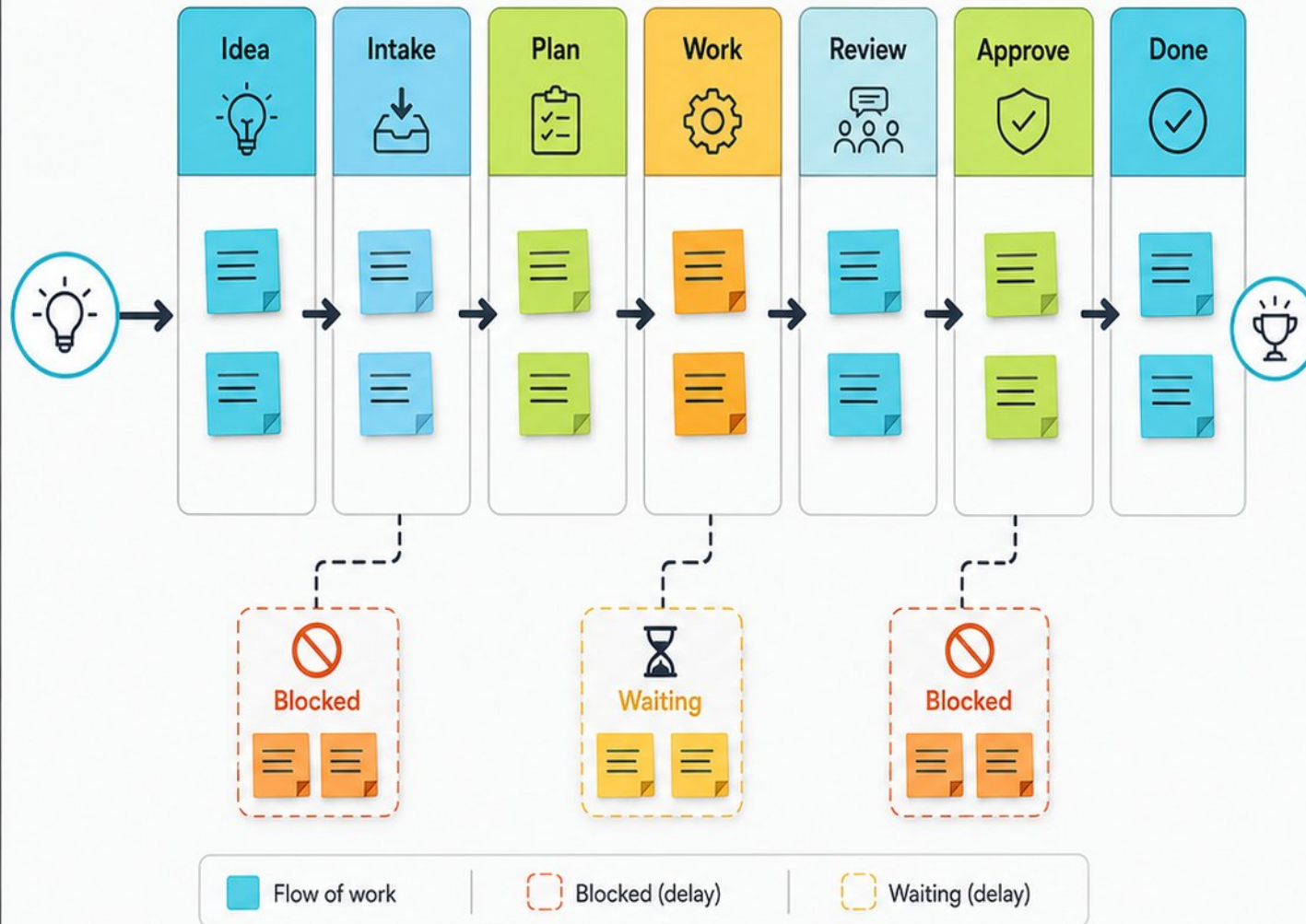


# The Core Practices of Kanban

- Define and visualize your workflow from idea to delivery
- Actively manage items: control WIP, prevent aging, unblock work
- Improve collaboratively using cycle time, throughput, and work item age
- Make policies explicit and use feedback loops to guide evolution
- Apply the scientific method: experiment, measure, and adapt incrementally



# Mapping Your Workflow to a Board



- Start with your actual current process, not an idealized future one



- Identify distinct stages: where work enters, flows, and exits



- Include waiting or blocked states to surface delays immediately



- Common patterns: software, marketing, and HR workflows all differ



- Run a lightweight mapping exercise with the team on a whiteboard



# Understanding and Setting WIP Limits



WIP limits cap items in a stage, forcing finish before new starts



Reduce context switching, expose bottlenecks, prevent overload



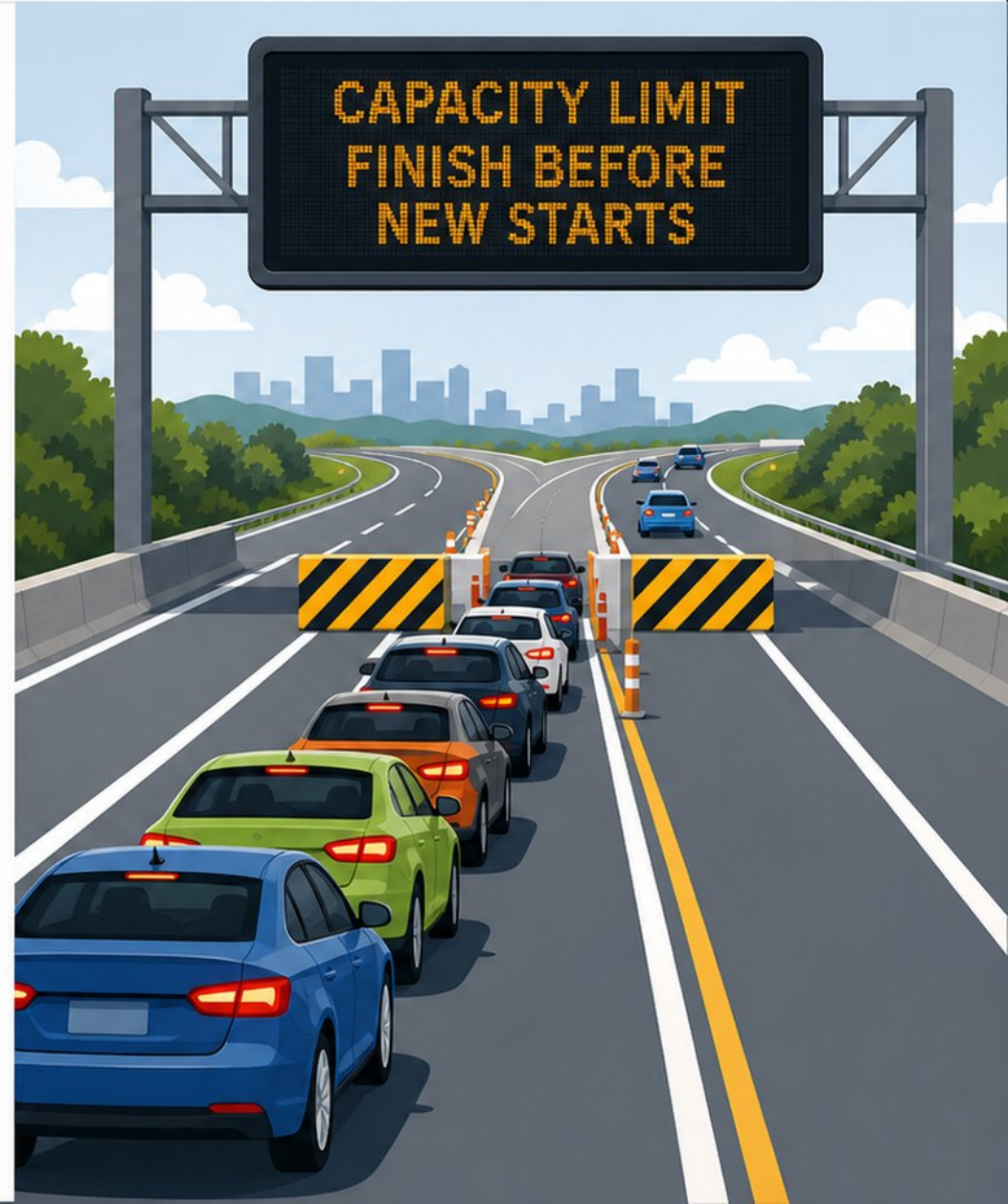
Start with data: observe current WIP for 2-4 weeks, apply 80% rule



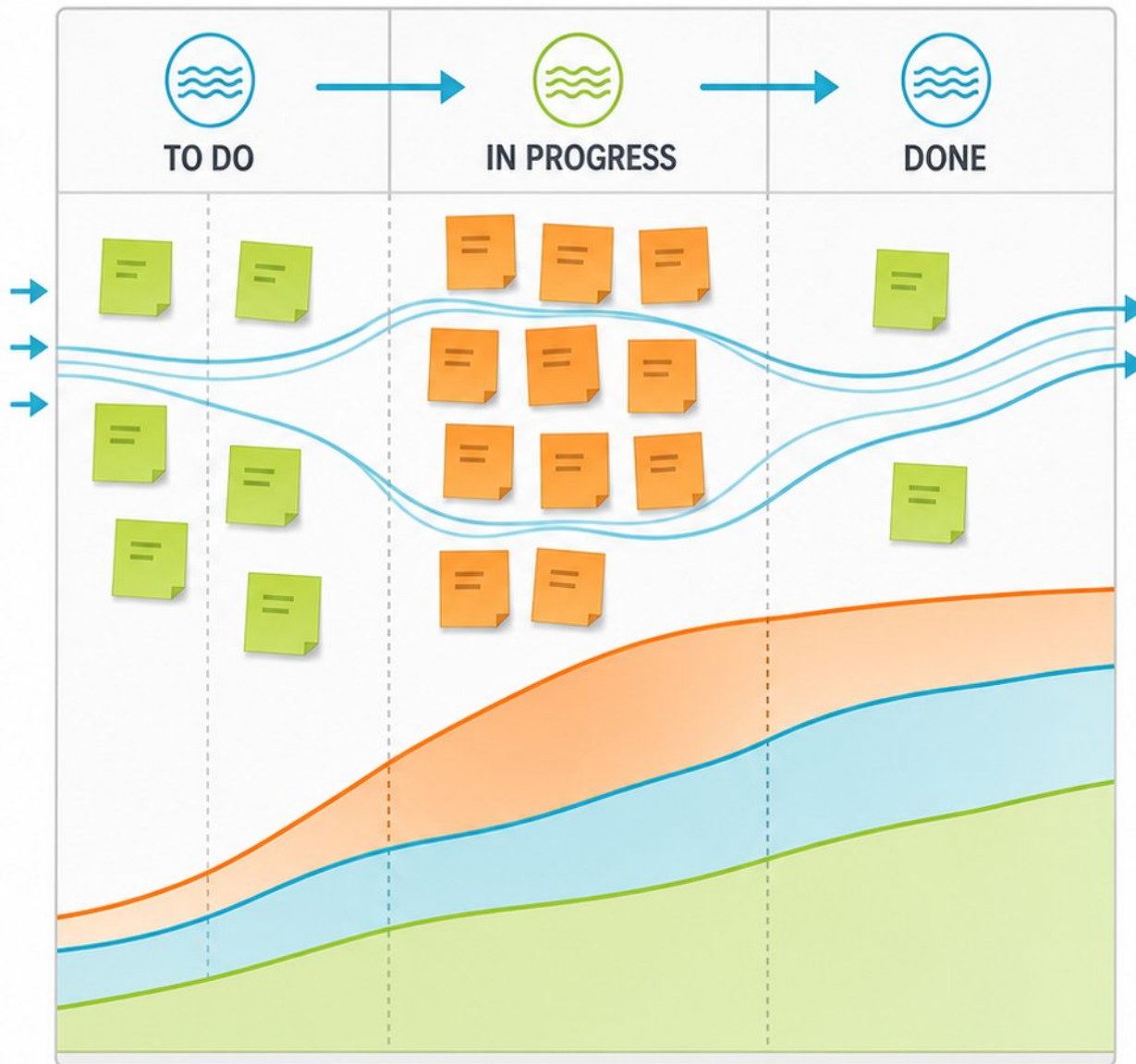
Tighten limits on constrained stages first (Review, Testing)



Limits trigger swarming conversations, not rigid rules



# Managing Flow and Spotting Bottlenecks



- Flow is smooth, predictable movement; manage it by monitoring progress and removing impediments



- Read the board: cards piling up in one column while others are empty reveals bottlenecks



- Cumulative Flow Diagrams (CFDs) show work volume per stage; widening bands signal accumulating work



- Common bottlenecks: single overloaded reviewer, unclear acceptance criteria, external dependencies



- Daily standup: focus on flow, not status—ask "What's blocked and how can we help?"

# Key Flow Metrics: WIP, Cycle Time, Throughput, and Work Item Age

- Four mandatory metrics: WIP, Throughput, Work Item Age, Cycle Time
- Cycle Time: elapsed time from start to finish; use 85th percentile for SLE
- Throughput: items finished per unit of time; reveals realistic delivery rate
- Work Item Age: early warning if it exceeds the SLE
- Measure to improve the system, not to judge individuals



# Getting Started: Your First Kanban Board in 30 Minutes



- “Map your current workflow, not an ideal future process”



- “Physical: whiteboard, sticky notes, columns for each stage”



- “Digital: Trello, Jira, ClickUp, or Asana”



- “Populate with all current work—perfection isn't the goal”



- “One daily policy: cards move when work moves”



# The First Week: What to Watch For and Adjust



- Observe first: where cards pile up, which columns stay empty, and what never moves



- Common discoveries: hidden work, dependencies, and tasks "almost done" for weeks



- Set one WIP limit on the most congested active column; start generous and tighten



- Watch reactions: does the board spark useful conversations and focused standups?



- Adjust one thing at a time; learn from each change before making the next



# Making Policies Explicit



- Explicit policies are the 'rules of the game' everyone agrees on



- Example: 'A card is ready for Review only when all acceptance criteria are met'



- Display policies directly on the board, next to the relevant columns



- Cover entry/exit criteria, WIP limits, blocked items, and work item types



- Review policies in retrospectives and evolve them based on what you learn



# Classes of Service and Swimlanes



- Classes of Service define work treatment: Expedite, Fixed Date, Standard, Intangible (tech debt/improvements)



- Each class has distinct policies, WIP limits, and service level expectations



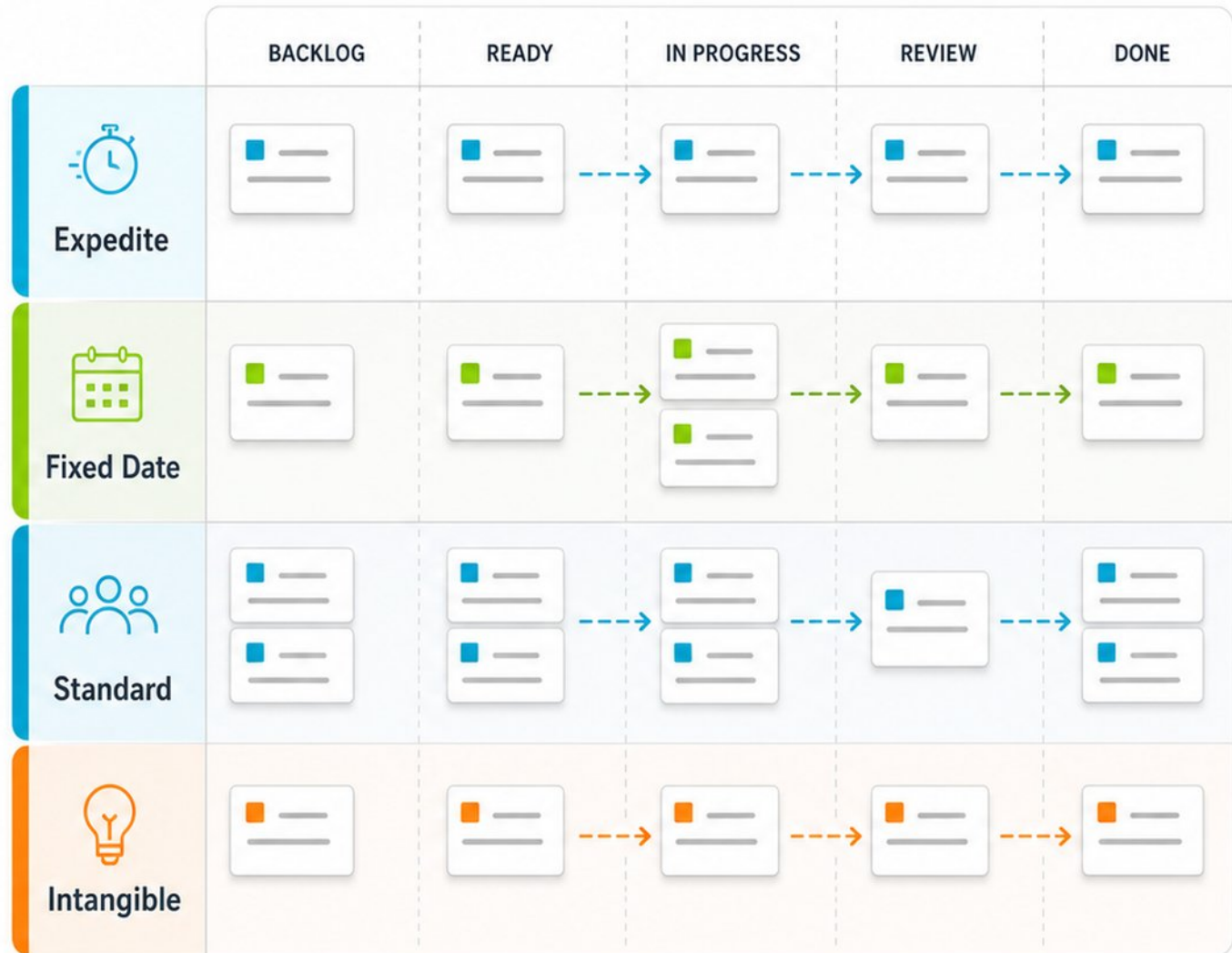
- Swimlanes are horizontal rows grouping work by class, type, team, priority, or theme



- Use swimlanes to separate streams (e.g., Features vs. Bugs vs. Technical Debt) on one board



- Start simple: one swimlane for Standard work, one for Expedite; add more only when needed



BACKLOG



READY



IN PROGRESS



REVIEW



DONE

# Digital Kanban Tools for Distributed Teams



- Pick tools by job: personal flow (Trello), strict team delivery (Jira, Linear), or all-in-one (ClickUp, Asana)



- Evaluate for WIP limits, swimlanes, CFDs, automations, and stack integrations



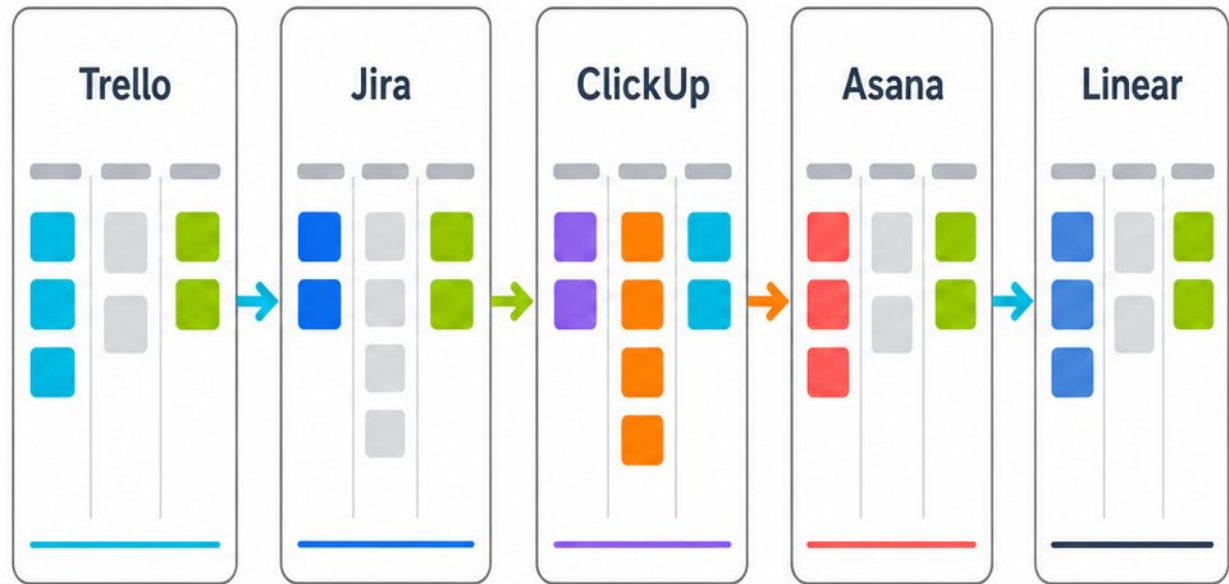
- Free tiers available: Trello, ClickUp, Jira (up to 10 users), and Asana



- Leading 2026 tools: Trello, Jira, ClickUp, Asana, Linear, Kanban Tool



- The tool is secondary to the practice; an updated board beats a sophisticated one



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an updated board beats a sophisticated one

# Evolving Your Board and Practices



- Kanban is not a one-time setup; evolve as your team learns and context changes.



- Signals to evolve: persistent bottlenecks, new work types, or outgrowing structure.



- Add swimlanes for classes of service, teams, or strategic themes.



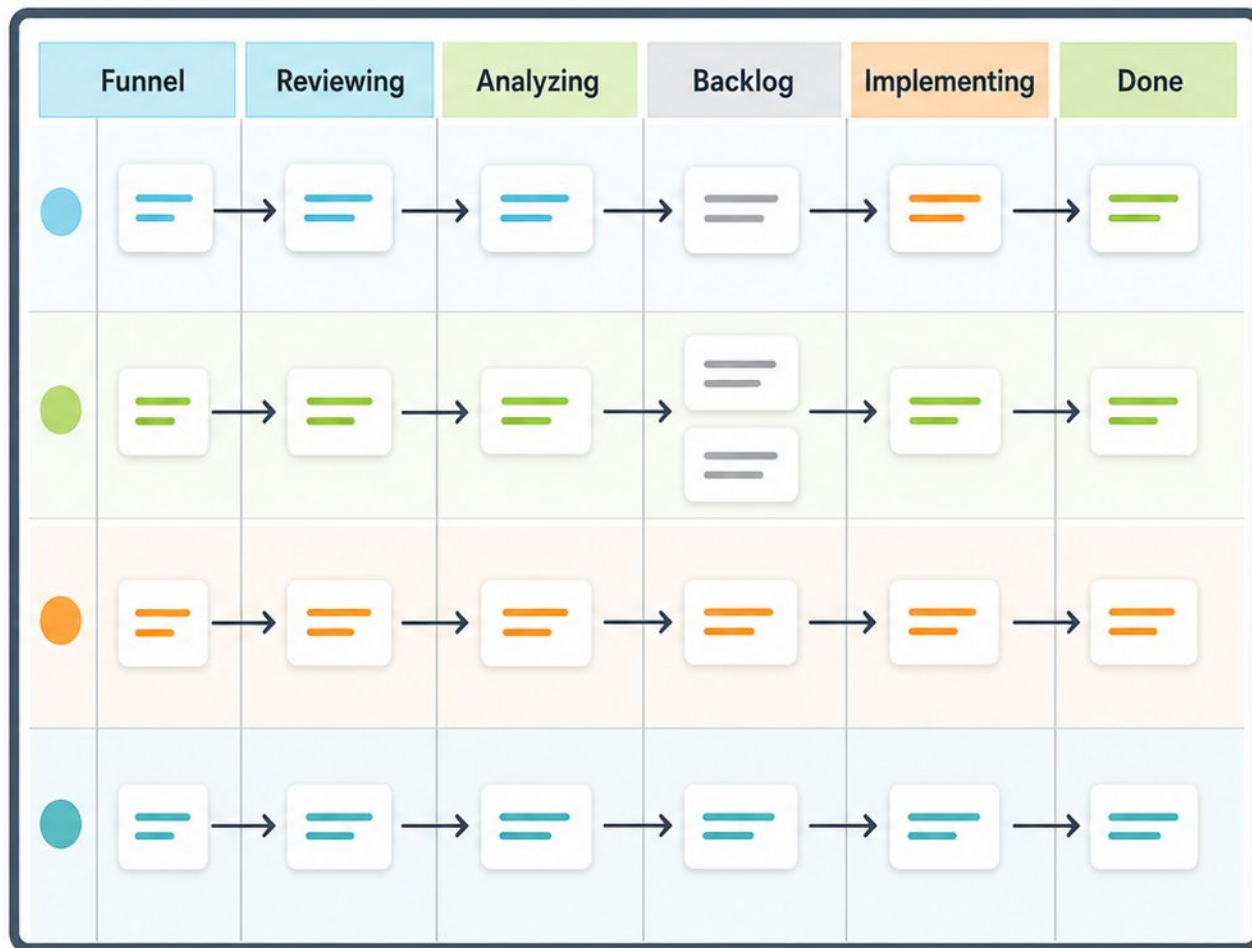
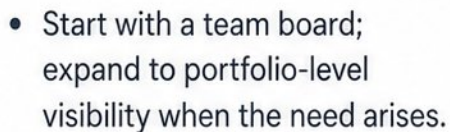
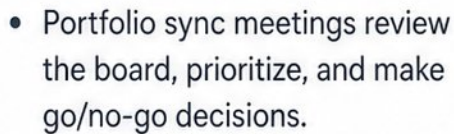
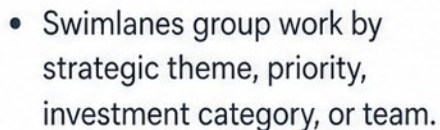
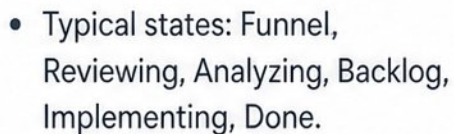
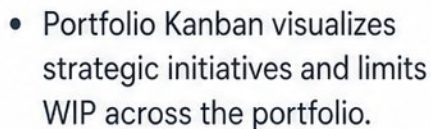
- Run retrospectives focused on board design: "Which columns or policies need change?"



- Change one variable at a time, measure impact on flow metrics, and iterate.



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# Key Takeaways and Next Steps



Visualize work, limit WIP, and actively manage flow to improve delivery



This week: map your workflow, create a board, populate it, set one WIP limit, and hold a daily standup



Start with your current process, respect existing roles, and evolve incrementally



Track WIP, cycle time, and throughput; use data to improve the system, not judge individuals



Explore the Kanban Guide ([kanbanguides.org](http://kanbanguides.org)), Kanban University, and Lean Kanban conferences

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