
DOING, DOING, DONE

“Personal kanban”: a life-changing time-management system that explodes the myth of multitasking

Lila MacLellan | May 29, 2017



POPULAR

📷 Breathe a little. (Unsplash/Andrew Neel)

Multitasking is probably the single most overrated skill in modern life. It [drains your brain of oxygenated glucose](#) that could be put toward paying more focused attention, makes it difficult for a person to switch between tasks, and is generally [an illusion anyway](#). Only 3% of the population are “supertaskers,”



**ence-backed trick to reduce
and anxiety takes just 30
nds and a pen**

according to [a study from Ohio University](#). The rest of us just pretend to be.

A number of systems have been developed to save us from our endless to-do lists, which can turn any job into a soulless assembly line of chores. One such system is “[Personal Kanban](#),” which was named for the Japanese concept that inspired it, a just-in-time manufacturing process developed at Toyota in the late 1940s.

In an industrial setting, Kanban (which means “signboard” or “billboard” in Japanese, as a recent [Medium post](#) explains) relies on tickets that move with each product through a plant. Only a certain number of one type of ticket can be on a line at one time, and it must correspond to one specific car part.

James Benson, a former urban planner based in Seattle who authored *Personal Kanban: Mapping Work—Navigating Life*, tells Quartz that industrial Kanban was a way for Toyota to avoid overproducing. He has adapted the system to reduce overhead of the emotional sort—the “too many tasks on my mind” feeling that’s the biggest downside of our mostly doomed attempts to multitask.

Personal Kanban works on two principles: Visualize your work, and limit your total number of “works in progress.” Setting up a system is simple:

- Find a board with which you can use magnets, post-it notes, or thumbtacks. On it, create three columns: Options, Doing, and Done.
- Write your individual tasks down on separate cards. You might customize these tickets by urgency or type (perhaps personal or business) with colors or symbols. Post all of these cards in the “Options” column.
- From that column, choose no more than three to move into the middle “Doing” column. These are the works in progress you’re focused on in a timeframe of your choosing.
- When a task is complete, move it into the “Done” column, and

choose a new option to pull into “Doing.”

The “options” column makes it possible to see everything that’s on your list and assess what’s manageable or not. (Do you need to delegate, hire another person, or arrange for temporary help? Should something about the way you work change so that the backlog of “options” doesn’t become a field of forgotten dreams?)

The middle column is the “now” that matters most, according to Benson, and should never contain more than three tickets. You could minimize your in-progress task to one, but the author and consultant says that’s probably not an honest number, and could undermine this entire process. Most of us have at least two competing priorities at a given time, while a third task might be more passive. (Maybe you’re working on two projects at home while doing the laundry, for instance.) Squeezing more than three items into the “doing” column, on the other hand, likely means you’re taxing your brain and slowing it down.

Starting but not finishing too many projects puts a person at risk of the so-called Zeigarnik effect, named for [Bluma Zeigarnik](#), a Russian psychiatrist who, in the 1920s, discovered that people are better at remembering unfinished tasks than completed ones. Unfinished items that we’ve left hanging are like cognitive itches. (Zeigarnik first made this observation watching servers remember detailed meal orders at a restaurant only as long as the order was in process.)

This Kanban user appears to be slipping in a fourth task:

.@patrickwied on going low-tech with productivity tracking: <http://t.co/BwqnzYtwkB> // love the personal kanban :) <pic.twitter.com/m86QM4awXs>

— Ben Drucker (@bendrucker) [May 31, 2014](#)

The appeal of the “done” column needs no elaboration. Studies have shown we get a dopamine kick from [just saying the word “done.”](#) “The act of completion is affirming in and of itself,” Benson adds.

Importantly, “done” doesn’t have to be dead, however, and this is pretty key to Benson’s theory. With some coding or sub-categorization, this column can morph into a record of your work that offers some

useful insights.

Benson and Tonianne DeMaria Barry, his business partner and co-author of the [Personal Kanban](#) book, have come up with matrixes to rank the items you most enjoyed doing, least enjoyed, slapped together in a hurry, felt no control over, and so on. They promise that, after a while, a few universals will appear. You'll be able to see where you're always getting stuck, and where you succeed most often, and why.

Gaining some self-awareness is the promise of sticking to this plan, at least for long enough to start seeing patterns. (Benson admits that people don't stick to systems forever.) "If you find all your stuff is emergencies, that's the point at which you need to reassess your life," says Benson. He once heard from a woman who changed careers and left her marriage after adopting the system, he said.

Benson first designed Personal Kanban for software developers about 10 years ago, but he says IT workers weren't that interested. He went on to design his method—since used in schools, health organizations, governments, and a range of project-based industries—while a former colleague launched [LeanKanban University](#), a more intense training program.

Several popular software programs are based on the Kanban system, too, including Pivotal Tracker, and Trello. Benson prefers actual boards because "they're tactile and they live in space and time," he says, noting studies that have proven we [process more information](#) when we write things down.

Ultimately, he wants his model to help people find themselves—quite literally. That's a feature worth thinking about, even for those of us who prefer reading about (or reporting on) productivity systems, knowing we'll never act on them. (Guilty.) "We get so overloaded, we lose sight of who we are, and what we can do, and makes us us," he says. "We start to believe we're just a person filling space."

In theory or practice, the best time-management systems aren't about increasing churn; they're about making room [to be human](#).