

Ep #24: Sticking with Change When Change Gets Hard



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John E. Grant

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Visualizing your work on a Kanban Board can be a life changing improvement to your and your team's overall productivity. But adopting the board as a tool and, really, the Kanban method more broadly can be a little uncomfortable at first. In today's episode, I share tips and some personal examples to help you stick with the Kanban method and keep using your board to get those benefits, even when the going gets tough and parts of your brain are tempted to retreat to your old ways of working. Ready to become a more agile attorney? Let's go.

Welcome to *The Agile Attorney* podcast powered by Agile Attorney Consulting. I'm John Grant and I've spent the last decade helping lawyers and legal teams harness the tools of modern entrepreneurship to build practices that are profitable, scalable, and sustainable for themselves and their communities. Each episode I offer principles, practices, and other ideas to help legal professionals of all kinds be more agile in your legal practice.

Hey everyone, welcome back to the podcast. I'm going to keep things a little brief this week since this episode is coming out on a national holiday here in the US. Hopefully you are enjoying the day, celebrating, spending time with friends and loved ones. But I did want to hit on a quick topic that's come up a fair bit lately with some of my clients, especially ones who are newer to the Kanban method. And it has to do with the agile practice, the Kanban practice of making work visible, which of course is one of the core tools of the methodology.

It's not the only one. There's lots of things you can do in Agile and Kanban that don't involve a Kanban board, but making work visible via the Kanban board is this magical step really that helps people understand and visualize their work and their workflows and process them in ways that they're not doing currently or that they weren't doing before. I'm not going to do a deep dive here on building a Kanban board, but go back and listen to episode four of the podcast if you are sort of new to the method or catching up on what the Kanban board is and how to build one for yourself.

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The key thing is that the Kanban board is about making the work and the workflow visual, and that's the practice from the Kanban method, make the work visible. And this really interesting thing happens when a person or a team starts using a Kanban board. And they've got the work represented as cards and the workflow stages represented as columns. And they've created cards for all of the work that they're committed to, right? The projects, the matters, the task sets, stuff they know they're supposed to be doing.

And at first there's this cathartic feeling of getting it all out of your head so that you can see it. And one of the things I hear all the time is now that I've seen my work this way, I can't unsee it. And initially it can provide a sense of calm and sort of understanding and order that this mental burden that you've been carrying around in your head becomes externally visible and your brain can process it and think about it in a different way. And it really is sort of magical when you first recognize and understand your work in this visual way.

The challenge comes because those commitments aren't static, right? New things keep coming in. And there's something about adding those new tasks or those new projects to the board that when you're in the early stages of the methodology, it becomes hard to do, right? There's sort of this reluctance I see for people to put new work on the board because we've made our work visible. We see that we're overwhelmed, that there's more work than we think that we should naturally be able to process, right? It seems like a lot.

And now this new thing has come in and we don't want to add it to the board because we're already so busy. It's just going to stress us out even more that we're not getting the work done. And so we hide it, right? We don't put it on the board. We leave it in our brain. We put it in our inbox, on a sticky note, on a to-do list, on the desk. It goes to some other place. We're still committing to the work. We're still saying we'll do it. We're just not reflecting that work in the board.

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Now you've got a problem because you've lost your single source of truth, right? Your old source of truth was whatever you were doing before you adopted the Kanban board, carrying stuff around in your brain, putting on a Word doc, an Excel sheet, a yellow legal pad, some other system, whatever it was, but when you revert to that partially, now you're not operating from a single system showing all of your commitments. And that makes it harder to prioritize because you don't have everything in front of you in one place.

And this is a totally natural thing. I get it, right? Your Kanban board is the visual manifestation of your honest reckoning with capacity, the thing I talk about all the time. It makes it easy to see when you're overcommitted. But there's this other part of your brain that's tied to your old ways of working, of taking on too much work.

And that's your comfort zone, even if it's a not optimal comfort zone. And that part of your brain is basically saying, who's this Kanban board to tell me I'm overcommitted? I want to do this new thing and I'm going to]let it in, darn it. And so you make this mental commitment or maybe a verbal commitment or you write it down somewhere, but it becomes this sneaky way to let yourself go over capacity again.

And I'll admit, look, this happens to me too. I'm not perfect. I've been doing this methodology for a long time And just recently, I overcommitted on some things and put myself overcapacity. And anyone that tried to e-mail me and is waiting for a response probably has experienced that. And you know, I wasn't too far overcapacity and I'm in the process of catching up, but it happens. It's real.

But the thing that I've noticed in the years that I've been using this methodology is that I really have retrained my brain around capacity. And so a couple things are true that I've learned how to do. Number one, even when I write stuff down and I still take physical notes, I still have sticky notes that I will jot down things on, but then Then I take a beat and every

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so often, maybe ideally once a day, but at least a couple, three times a week, I will collect those things and put them back onto the Kanban board so that all of my work is in a single place.

I do the same thing from my inbox, right? If there is something that someone is asking of me or that I've committed to do that comes in through my e-mail, I will transfer that e-mail or at least get the gist of it onto to my Kanban board so that all of my commitments are present and in front of me in one place. And while my brain is still a yes man, right, I still want to deliver, my natural tendency is to basically say, yeah, I can help you with that.

What putting the work on the board does and using the board on a regular basis does is create a feedback loop where my brain at a more intellectual level is able to say, oh gosh, no, I need to put a pause on that. I need to be more careful about the new commitments I make because I've already got a lot of balls in the air and I'm not going to be able to deliver them if I keep taking on more work.

But the thing I see with my clients, and again, especially my newer clients, is they know, and I'm telling them, that making the work visible is going to help them with their overall productivity, with their workflows, and really help tame that overburden, that overwhelmed that they're feeling. But part of their brain just doesn't believe it yet, right? They're still taking on new work, but they're not putting on the board. And that means they're continuing to put themselves over capacity.

Or worse, right, the board is reflecting back this sort of maybe personal shortcoming or whatever. It's basically saying, look, you keep putting yourself over capacity and the board is a manifestation of that. And so, they're basically saying, I don't want to feel bad about myself, so I'm going to feel bad about the board, and I'm going to stop looking at the board. And it's this kind of funny spiral, right?

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The initial board looks great. When they set it up, the work is visible, and it's empowering, and then after using it for a couple of weeks, or a couple of months, there's so much work on there that it gets almost depressing, or sort of demotivating, because it's reflecting the overburden, and you don't want to look at it, and I get that. And again, then they wind up reverting back to carrying stuff around in their head or their physical notes or their inbox, and now you've got the source of truth problem.

So what do you do about it when you're experiencing that sort of tendency, this very natural tendency to avoid looking at the thing that is causing you pain or that is reflecting your pain back onto you? And at a blunt level, honestly, you kind of just got to power through, right? As you adopt the new methodology and the tool, and this is anything about a new methodology, it's not going to feel great. There's always this sort of trough of discomfort or just where you're really not completely sure that this new thing is going to work.

And it's really easy when you get into that trough to retreat back to your old ways of working. And I guarantee you there is light and happiness and goodness on the other side, not perfection, right? It's always going to be a little bit of a tension, but if you just power through, it is going to get better. And I think there are some things about the Kanban method and the Kanban board that help create a positive feedback loop as well, right? Moving a card to done and seeing that work stack up is uniquely satisfying, right?

Some of the tools will maybe give you a little confetti spray or other positive feedback when you move something to done, and that's cute, But really just seeing the work in the done column and that physical act, even if it's just dragging a mouse or trackpad or moving the card into done is, a lot of people tell me, and I think this is true for me too, it's more satisfying than checking something off on a checklist or scratching it out on the checklist, which a lot of people like to do. Because you can really see the done work stack up and that feels good.

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So lean into that, right? Go seeking that positive feedback loop of, oh, it feels so good to get work done, rather than the sort of negative thing that is to the left of done, which is, oh my gosh, I have so much work to do. And when you see all that work to do, sometimes you want to hide from it, right? You want to close the tab or put it behind another window. or just avoid it entirely. And again, I get it, but try to make sure, maybe put something on your calendar that says, I'm going to check this, commit to doing it every day or at least several times a week, and that'll help.

One of the things I do, I've got a two monitor set up and one of my monitors is widescreen. It's where I'm doing most of my work day-to-day, but my laptop monitor off to the side is where I try to keep my Kanban board open and have it on top. And so for the software that I'm using, I've got that board in my periphery all the time. It makes it really easy for me to jump over to that other screen to add things, to move them to done, to update cards if I'm making progress but not getting it all the way finished, things like that.

It also helps provide a little bit of that reality check, right, and I'm mostly a solo. I've got a great virtual assistant. We work on the board together, but we're not communicating every day. And so the board is the thing that allows me when a new request comes in over e-mail or I get whatever is happening and my brain wants to say yes, the fact that the board is there off to my right, I can glance at it and be like, okay, I probably can't commit to this, at least not right now. So when do I have a window? When am I going to be able to do this work? And the board helps me make better decisions about whether or not to commit to new work and when I can promise that new work.

Another thing I try to do is make sure that some of my non-work commitments are on my board, whether it's family stuff, medical appointments, going to the gym, whatever, that's all stuff that is taking up my capacity. And if I don't put it on the board, I will wind up committing to more and more work things and then let those other commitments fall by

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the wayside. So, especially like in the summer, my kids are out of school, there's more things I need to do to help manage their day, which means I have less capacity for getting stuff done in my work. And I use cards to represent that, at least at some level, right?

If you're working on a team, you can keep the details and the names of the cards vague if you are worried about privacy, but I still think doing something to keep the personal tasks, the admin tasks, stuff that's not just your client work, but all the things that are taking up your finite capacity, giving them some visual representation on your board really helps with that total capacity, total overwhelm problem.

All right, so a couple of quick takeaways. Number one, if you're not using a Kanban board, go back and listen to episode four about setting one up. There's plenty to learn. Also, a lot of the recommended tools that I have, and that's at agileattorney.com/slash/start. They've got great tutorials for getting up and running. And with Kanban Zone in particular, there are a lot of templates, including some that I've developed with them for law practice. and so you won't be starting from zero. Definitely think about using the Kanban methodology if you're not already.

Then, you know, once you've adopted it, you've made the work visible, but that initial excitement or that initial sort of burst of energy starts to wear off, recognize that it's part of the change process. That feeling of dread at not wanting to put more work on an already full board is actually a good thing, right? Instead of sparking that dread, what hopefully it will do is start to retrain your brain into something where you're realizing, well, maybe I shouldn't commit to this thing, and I can say no, or at least not now, to new requests for work or from using my capacity.

That's it for today. Thank you for listening, and I will talk to you again next week.

Thanks for listening to *The Agile Attorney* podcast. I'm your host, John Grant. If you found today's episode interesting or useful, please share it

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