Kanban vs Scrum: differences, when to use each, and Scrumban

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Scrum and Kanban are both ways to deliver work in small pieces with frequent feedback. Scrum organises work into fixed-length Sprints with defined accountabilities and events. Kanban organises it as a continuous flow with limits on work in progress. Neither is better in general; they fit different kinds of work.

TL;DR The short version

- Scrum delivers in fixed Sprints with defined roles and events; Kanban delivers as a continuous flow with limits on work in progress.
- Scrum fits product work with a clear goal; Kanban fits operations, support and platform teams where work arrives unpredictably.
- Many teams mix them as Scrumban; to start Kanban, map your real workflow and set WIP limits lower than feels comfortable.

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Side by side

- **Cadence:** Scrum works in Sprints of one month or less; Kanban flows continuously.
- **Roles:** Scrum defines Product Owner, Scrum Master and Developers; Kanban defines none.
- **Planning:** Scrum commits to a Sprint Goal; Kanban pulls the next item when capacity frees up.
- **Change:** in Scrum, change mid-Sprint must not endanger the Sprint Goal; in Kanban, priorities can change any time.
- **Key limit:** Scrum limits time with the Sprint; Kanban limits work in progress (WIP).
- **Main measures:** Scrum teams often use velocity; Kanban teams use cycle time and throughput.

When Scrum fits

- Product development with a clear goal over weeks.
- Teams that benefit from regular planning and review with stakeholders.
- New teams that need structure to start working together.

When Kanban fits

- Operations, support, platform and SRE teams where work arrives unpredictably.
- Teams with many small, independent items.

- Situations where a two-week commitment would be broken every few days by urgent work.

Scrumban and mixing

Many teams combine them: Sprints and a Sprint Goal from Scrum, a WIP-limited board and flow metrics from Kanban. Using a Kanban board within Scrum is common. Be honest about what you dropped: removing the Retrospective or the Sprint Goal and still calling it Scrum causes confusion.

Getting started with Kanban

1. Map your real workflow as board columns.
2. Set a WIP limit per column, lower than feels comfortable.
3. Stop starting, start finishing: pull new work only when something moves on.
4. Track cycle time and review the board regularly to improve flow.

> Related credential: Agile Delivery Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Schwaber, K. and Sutherland, J. (2020). The Scrum Guide. scrumguides.org.
2. IICTP. TPBOK, Engineering Governance & Agile Delivery. iictp.org/standards/tpbok.

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