What is trunk-based development?

1 November 2026 · 4 min read · blogs.iictp.org/what-is-trunk-based-development

Trunk-based development is a way of working in which developers merge small changes into one shared main branch, the trunk, at least daily. Branches, if used at all, last hours or a day or two, which keeps integration problems small.

TL;DR The short version

- In trunk-based development everyone merges small changes into one main branch at least daily, keeping integration problems small.
- Unfinished work ships hidden behind feature flags.
- It needs a fast automated test suite and a habit of keeping the trunk working, and research links it to better delivery.

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How is it different from long-lived feature branches?

With long-lived branches, work diverges for weeks and the merge is large, risky and full of conflicts. With trunk-based work, everyone integrates continuously, so the code on the trunk is always close to what everyone is working on.

How do you ship unfinished work?

You hide it behind a feature flag or build it so that it is not yet reachable. The code is merged and deployed, but users do not see it until the flag is turned on, which separates deploying from releasing.

What does it require?

A fast automated test suite, because every merge must be checked quickly, and a team habit of keeping the trunk working. Small changes, good review turnaround and a rule that a broken trunk is fixed first are all part of it.

How does release work?

Releases are cut from the trunk, or from a short-lived release branch for stabilising a version. Hotfixes are made on the trunk and brought to the release, which avoids many parallel branches to maintain.

Who benefits and who struggles?

Teams that want fast, frequent releases benefit most, and research on delivery performance links it to better outcomes. Teams with weak automated testing struggle until they build it, so improve the tests first.

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

Sources and further reading

1. trunkbaseddevelopment.com. Trunk Based Development.
2. DORA. Capabilities: Trunk-based development. dora.dev.

Published by IICTP, an independent technical credential body, on 1 November 2026. The current version of this post is at https://blogs.iictp.org/what-is-trunk-based-development. More guides: blogs.iictp.org.