STM JOURNALS

Journal of
Industrial Safety Engineering

ISSN: 2395-6674
Volume 12, Issue 1, 2025
January–April
DOI (Journal): 10.37591/JoISE

https://journals.stmjournals.com/joise

Research JoISE

Optimizing Lean Manufacturing Through Kanban: Enhancing Efficiency and Safety in Industrial Operations

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Abstract

Lean manufacturing aims to maximize productivity while minimizing waste, and one of the most effective techniques to achieve this is the Kanban system. Derived from the Japanese term meaning "signboard," Kanban provides a structured approach to inventory control and production scheduling by specifying what, when, and how to produce based on real-time demand. When properly implemented, the Kanban system enhances efficiency, reduces excess inventory, and improves workflow coordination, leading to substantial cost savings. Additionally, Kanban contributes to industrial safety by preventing overproduction, reducing material handling risks, and promoting an organized and systematic work environment. This review examines the role of Kanban in optimizing lean manufacturing, focusing on its principles, implementation strategies, and overall benefits. It highlights the system's contribution to waste reduction, demand-driven production, and continuous improvement while emphasizing its impact on operational safety and workplace efficiency. By integrating real-time inventory management and streamlined workflows, Kanban enables industries to achieve higher productivity with improved safety measures, making it a valuable strategic approach for modern manufacturing environments.

Keywords: Lean manufacturing, pull system, kanban system and just in time

INTRODUCTION

Lean manufacturing is a systematic approach designed to eliminate waste while maximizing value, enabling organizations to improve operational efficiency, enhance productivity, and maintain a safe working environment. Among its core methodologies, the Kanban system plays a crucial role by providing a structured, visual framework for managing workflows and optimizing production processes. Originally developed as part of Toyota's Production System (TPS), Kanban relies on visual signals—such as cards, digital displays, or indicator boards—to regulate production flow, prevent overproduction, and facilitate just-in-time (JIT) manufacturing.

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Received Date: February 26, 2025
Accepted Date: March 01, 2025
Published Date: March 14, 2025

Citation: Heena M. Patel, Mayur R. Chotaliya, Darshan H. Bhalodia, Rohit R. Raval. Optimizing Lean Manufacturing Through Kanban: Enhancing Efficiency and Safety in Industrial Operations. Journal of Industrial Safety Engineering. 2025; 12(1): 37–42p.

Beyond its role in improving efficiency, Kanban contributes significantly to industrial safety by reducing clutter, minimizing excess inventory, and ensuring a well-organized production floor. This review explores the role of the Kanban system in lean manufacturing, emphasizing its impact on operational efficiency, safety management, and continuous process improvement. By analyzing case studies and real-world implementations, this paper highlights how Kanban fosters a safer, more structured, and hazard-free industrial environment.

Understanding the Kanban System

The Kanban system is a workflow management approach designed to visualize processes, optimize

resource allocation, and improve workplace efficiency. The term Kanban, meaning "signboard" or "card" in Japanese, represents the use of visual indicators to monitor task progress and streamline workflows.

Key Components of the Kanban System

Visual Workflow Representation

A Kanban board is commonly used to track work stages, typically divided into columns such as "To Do," "In Progress," and "Completed." This system enhances process transparency, reduces miscommunication, and supports proactive safety measures by ensuring real-time tracking of tasks.

Work-in-Progress (WIP) Limits

Restricting the number of tasks in each phase of the workflow helps prevent overload, minimizes task-switching inefficiencies, and ensures a safer work environment by reducing stress-induced errors and operational bottlenecks.

Pull System for Controlled Production

Unlike traditional push-based production, where tasks are assigned in bulk, Kanban follows a pull-based approach, moving work forward only when capacity allows. This minimizes overproduction, prevents stockpiling of excess materials, and reduces workplace congestion, lowering the risk of accidents.

Incremental and Continuous Delivery

The Kanban methodology promotes gradual, steady work progression rather than large-batch processing, improving responsiveness to changes while ensuring safety protocols are consistently maintained.

Continuous Process Improvement

By visualizing workflows and analyzing performance metrics such as cycle time and lead time, organizations can identify inefficiencies, reduce process delays, and enhance overall safety by proactively addressing potential hazards.

Kanban and Just-in-Time (JIT) Manufacturing: Addressing Safety Challenges

Just-in-time (JIT) manufacturing is a production strategy designed to produce goods only as needed, reducing waste and improving efficiency. However, traditional JIT systems assume stable production conditions, which may not always be achievable in real-world scenarios. Uncertainties such as fluctuating demand, variable processing times, and unplanned disruptions (e.g., machine breakdowns, supply chain delays) can lead to decreased throughput, increased backlog, and unsafe working conditions due to rushed production schedules.

To address these challenges, this study introduces the Flexible Kanban System (FKS)—an enhanced approach designed to accommodate variability in production environments while maintaining efficiency and safety. The FKS adapts to real-time disruptions by dynamically adjusting workflow controls, reducing downtime, and ensuring smoother operations under uncertain conditions. Multiple case studies comparing the FKS with traditional JIT methods demonstrate its effectiveness in reducing operational risks, preventing production overload, and maintaining workplace safety.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of lean manufacturing has gained significant traction in the industrial sector, particularly in enhancing operational efficiency, reducing waste, and improving workplace safety. The Kanban system, as a critical component of lean manufacturing, has been widely studied for its role in minimizing inventory levels, optimizing production flow, and ensuring a safer and more organized manufacturing environment. Several studies have examined the implementation of Kanban across different industries, highlighting its impact on both productivity and industrial safety.

Nor Azian Abdul Rahman, Sariwati Mohd Sharif, and Mashitah Mohamed Esa explored the increasing adoption of lean manufacturing, particularly in Japan, emphasizing the role of the Kanban system in achieving low inventory and cost efficiency. Their study highlights that successful lean implementation requires strong commitment from top management, active vendor participation, effective inventory control, and continuous quality improvement. These factors not only enhance productivity but also contribute to a safer work environment by minimizing unnecessary material handling and reducing workplace congestion [1].

Vignesh Ravichandran and N. Ganesh Kumar analyzed the application of the Kanban system in a vessel manufacturing facility that produces compressor air receivers and air-oil separators. Frequent production stoppages due to inventory mismanagement hindered the plant's ability to meet consumer demand. By introducing the Kanban system, the facility was able to establish a pull-based inventory system, ensuring a steady supply of raw materials and reducing downtime. This approach improved workflow efficiency while simultaneously enhancing workplace safety by reducing excessive stockpiling and ensuring a more structured production process [2].

B. Vijaya Ramnath, C. Elanchezhian, and R. Kesavan examined the implementation of lean manufacturing in an engine valve machining cell within a leading auto component manufacturing company in South India. Their study aimed to identify sources of waste, optimize production processes, and improve overall efficiency. Using Value Stream Mapping (VSM), they analyzed the current operational state and recommended lean strategies to minimize inefficiencies. Specifically, a Kanban system was proposed for the pre-machining phase, while a single-piece flow concept was suggested for the machining phase. These modifications not only reduced material waste but also created a safer work environment by streamlining production activities and minimizing operational risks [3].

Mayatra, N.D. Chauhan, and Parthiv Trivedi provided a comprehensive review of lean manufacturing applications across various industries, including pharmaceuticals, automotive, cotton seed oil, and healthcare. Their study highlighted the necessity of lean principles in enhancing efficiency and eliminating waste while also improving workplace safety. The review emphasized the importance of integrating lean tools such as Just-in-Time (JIT) and Kanban to create systematic and hazard-free production environments. By reducing excess inventory, minimizing unnecessary movements, and improving process flow, lean methodologies contribute significantly to both operational performance and industrial safety [4].

The Kanban system has been widely studied for its role in optimizing production efficiency, reducing waste, and enhancing workplace safety. Its integration into lean manufacturing strategies has shown significant benefits across various industries. This section reviews key studies that explore Kanban's impact on inventory management, quality improvement, just-in-time production, and industrial safety.

Ohiomah and Aigbavboa (2017) examined the effectiveness of the Kanban system in achieving lean production with minimal inventory and lower operational costs. Their study, based on a survey of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), identified four critical factors for successful Kanban implementation: quality improvement, effective inventory management, strong top management commitment, and active vendor participation. These elements not only contribute to cost efficiency but also play a crucial role in ensuring workplace safety by maintaining a structured and controlled production environment [5].

Sugimori, Kusunoki, Cho, and Uchikawa (1977) analyzed the Toyota Production System, which was developed under the leadership of Taiichi Ohno, former Vice President of Toyota Motor Corporation. This study highlights two essential principles of the Kanban system: just-in-time production and respect-for-human management. The just-in-time principle ensures that production aligns precisely with demand, minimizing excess stock and reducing material handling risks. Meanwhile, the respect-for-

human principle fosters a safe and collaborative working environment, allowing employees to actively participate in process improvements and hazard prevention strategies [6].

Divakaran and Sunil Kumar (2011) explored various Kanban planning and execution strategies in relation to lean manufacturing principles. Their research delves into key concepts such as engineering change management, total quality management, cellular manufacturing, and total preventive maintenance. Additionally, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of cost optimization methods, including Kaizen costing. These lean strategies contribute to safer industrial practices by reducing production inconsistencies, minimizing errors, and ensuring a systematic approach to workflow management [7].

Sendil Kumar and Panneerselvam (2007) conducted an extensive review of Just-In-Time (JIT) and Kanban-related literature, analyzing over 100 research publications. Their study discusses the push and pull system dynamics, the philosophy of JIT, and the mechanisms within Kanban that prevent production bottlenecks. A key focus of their research is the Measure of Performance (MOP), which evaluates the effectiveness of Kanban in maintaining an efficient and safe production system. The study also identifies emerging trends in JIT-Kanban research, with implications for future industrial safety improvements through enhanced process monitoring and real-time inventory control [8].

The Kanban system has been widely studied for its effectiveness in lean manufacturing, inventory management, and its role in improving operational efficiency. Various researchers have explored its applications across industries, highlighting its impact on reducing waste, enhancing productivity, and promoting a safer working environment.

According to Surendra et al. (1999), the Japanese term kanban translates to "visible record" or "visible part." In manufacturing, it represents a signaling system—often using Kanban cards—to regulate the flow of materials based on demand. The system functions on the principle that materials should only be moved or produced when triggered by a downstream process or customer request. This pull-based approach prevents excess inventory, reduces overproduction, and optimizes resource allocation. Surendra et al. (1999) further emphasize that Japanese industries widely adopt Kanban due to its benefits, including waste reduction, minimized scrap, improved workstation flexibility, reduced waiting times, and lower logistics costs. These factors contribute to not only leaner production but also enhanced workplace safety by minimizing material handling risks, excess storage hazards, and production inefficiencies [9].

Girma Mullisa and Abdul-Kader (year) explore Kanban as a critical tool for inventory control in manufacturing settings. Their study emphasizes the importance of determining the optimal number of Kanbans in a production system, which directly impacts efficiency, cost reduction, and safety. To achieve this, they developed a pull-based Kanban model integrated with discrete-event simulation technology. Their statistical validation, using ANOVA, determined that an optimal Kanban number of 275 ensured balanced workflow, reduced work-in-progress inventory, and minimized customer waiting time. This approach was applied to a manufacturing firm producing metal hand tools for construction and agriculture, industries where workplace safety is a primary concern. By optimizing inventory levels and reducing unnecessary material movement, the study highlights how Kanban contributes to a safer and more structured production environment [10].

METHODOLOGY

Lean Manufacturing Deployment Approach

The implementation of lean manufacturing follows a structured approach to streamline operations, minimize waste, and improve workplace safety. The key steps involved are:

Selection of Product or Product Family: Identifying a specific product or group of products and analyzing associated production workflows.

Current State Value Stream Mapping (VSM): Mapping the existing production processes to visualize inefficiencies and bottlenecks.

Waste Identification and Elimination: Detecting non-value-adding activities such as overproduction, waiting times, excess inventory, and unnecessary material handling, all of which contribute to safety risks.

Future State Value Stream Mapping: Designing an optimized process flow that integrates lean principles, including Kanban, to improve efficiency and workplace safety.

Implementation and Financial Analysis: Deploying the improved workflow model and evaluating its impact on cost savings, safety improvements, and operational efficiency.

Evolution of the Kanban System

The Kanban system was developed by Taiichi Ohno at Toyota in the late 1940s as part of the Toyota Production System (TPS) to enhance industrial productivity while maintaining a safe and organized work environment. Inspired by supermarket inventory practices, Kanban introduced the Just-in-Time (JIT) production model, which regulates workflow using visual signals such as cards or boards to control inventory and production levels.

Initially, Kanban helped Toyota reduce waste, prevent overproduction, and optimize resource utilization. Over time, its applications extended beyond manufacturing to sectors such as logistics, healthcare, and software development. In the 2000s, Kanban principles were integrated into agile methodologies, improving project management by enhancing task visualization and process optimization. The adoption of digital Kanban boards further revolutionized its use by enabling real-time progress tracking and operational transparency.

Today, Kanban remains a fundamental tool in lean management, supporting continuous improvement and workplace safety. As industries incorporate advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT), Kanban is evolving into a smarter workflow optimization system, ensuring not only efficiency but also improved industrial safety through predictive analytics and automation.

CONCLUSION

The Kanban system plays a critical role in enhancing efficiency, minimizing waste, and optimizing inventory management in lean manufacturing. By implementing a Just-in-Time (JIT) approach, Kanban helps prevent production bottlenecks, ensuring a smooth and continuous workflow while contributing to a safer and more organized industrial environment. This review highlights the key benefits of Kanban, including improved resource utilization, streamlined production processes, and greater adaptability to fluctuations in demand, all of which contribute to industrial safety and operational resilience.

However, successful Kanban implementation requires overcoming challenges such as resistance to change, integration complexities, and the necessity for continuous monitoring to maintain system effectiveness. The adoption of complementary lean tools, such as automation technologies and Six Sigma, can further enhance Kanban’s impact by improving process reliability and workplace safety.

Future research should focus on the integration of digital Kanban systems with emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and the Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT). These advancements can further enhance real-time monitoring, predictive analytics, and risk mitigation in industrial operations. Overall, Kanban remains a fundamental tool in lean manufacturing, promoting sustainable production practices, efficiency, and workplace safety in modern industrial settings.

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