

Business901 Podcast Transcription

Implementing Lean Marketing Systems



Throttling Work in Process Guest was Jim Benson

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Transcription of Interview

Joe: *Welcome everyone! This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 Podcast. With me today is Jim Benson. Jim is the CEO and founder of Modus Cooperandi. Is that correct Jim?*

Jim: *That is correct.*

Joe: *Jim may be best known as the co-author of Personal Kanban and one of the main drivers in using Kanban as a team and individual management system. Jim, thanks for joining me. It's been a long time since we have talked. How have you been?*

Jim: *Indeed it has been; it's been way too long.*

Joe: *Well you've been quite busy from my perspective following you on social media. You've got a few more publications and some exciting work with some very notable institutions. It seems like you're taking Kanban much farther than software development areas.*

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Jim: Oh absolutely. Since we last talked, we published the *Beyond Agile* book, and I believe that you interviewed Marissa. Then we also came out with the two other books, *Why Plans Fail* which is about the psychology of work and why our plans fail because we aren't thinking about completion, because we're thinking about other things. The third book was or is *Why Limit WIP*, and that's the most recent one and it's a pseudo business novel about why you should limit your Work in Process and actually how to do that.

Joe: *I thought that was an interesting approach when I read it because it seemed I was jumping into the mix with some people and then all of a sudden it changes person.*

Just for maybe that's not someone that's familiar with the terms, Why Limit WIP means, and WIP of course is Work in Process. I believe this a start of a series of books or do all your books build upon the other?

Jim: All five, hopefully, builds on the other five. But yes, there's a third book that is coming out which is *Why Kanban Works*, which describes functionally why *Kanban* is easily adoptable and why it seems to work in a great many situations. What we're hoping to do with these three books is provide to influencers the materials that they need to influence decision makers. If you're in an organization and you want to move into a system that is using *Kanban*, these books will give you the material you need to make your case.

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Joe: *When we talk about limiting work, is it just a prioritization thing? I mean what makes maybe WIP different than prioritizing what you're supposed to be doing?*

Jim: In software, there are bug tracking systems and other systems where you can prioritize work that you're doing and what always ends up happening is there's a scale; is this priority 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. And what that ends up meaning is that you have priority 1 which is stuff you're going to do and is an emergency, priority 2 which is stuff that really meant priority 1 but you didn't argue for it hard enough, and then 3, 4, and 5 all mean I'm never going to get that done.

So prioritization doesn't work because we think about prioritization as how badly would I like this to happen, and we want a lot of things to happen very badly. Limiting our work in process is actually the act of saying I'm only going to do one, or two, or three things at a time, and we're doing that because we want to be able to focus on them and complete them and complete them with quality.

Joe: *So this is very much different from Covey's Four Quadrants of Time Management because you're really looking more from should we say a completion aspect of it?*

Jim: Yes. So in the Eisenhower Model or in the Covey Model where we have the urgent and important matrix, right now what we do is we prioritize things and priority 1 is always urgent

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and important. We're just constantly focused on that which means we're in a state of constant panic. What we're not doing is we're not paying attention to the important but not urgent area which is where we actually improve our processes, create systems to build better product, and systems that are less taxing on the people who are in them.

When we limit our Work in Process, one of the first things that we do is we start to force things from the urgent and important areas into other areas of the matrix. We point out to ourselves that we have the capacity and right now; we're all currently working over capacity. That ends up becoming a vicious cycle where we're working so hard that we finish things before they're done; they're of poor quality and then we end up with rework. The more rework we have, the more emergencies we have and the more emergencies we have, the more rework we end up with. I'm positive that that's not the best way to handle one's work.

Joe: *Well, you have a matrix in the book where you talk about constraints and some of them bad and good. Can constraints be like your throttle for your work?*

Jim: Yes, yes. So Work in Process is a healthy constraint, and if you have no constraints, then you have no system. We build systems, or we come up with processes so that we can have a coherent way to finish what we're doing. Any system that we build needs to A, have the least amount of rules possible, so it needs to be as small as possible. And then the second thing is it needs to be as coherent as possible; so you need to be able to understand it and

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in order to understand it, it's helpful to not have to think too much about it.

That matrix in Chapter 6 of the book specifically weighs off the differences between flexibility and effectiveness for any type of a constraint. In order to have any System, we need to have a minimum amount of constraint, so the system has some definition and limiting WIP is a healthy constraint. It's saying you can't do more work than you can handle, and it's keeping you at a level where you are constantly working at or slightly below your capacity.

The throttle there is that if you want to get more work done, you have a lower Work in Process limit. If I want to work extremely fast, I will do one thing at a time. Two things I'll work a little bit slower, three a little bit slower, four a little bit slower. Because each time you add something, it adds to the cognitive load in your head and you're constantly thinking about the other things that you're not working on right now, and you're probably being distracted by people who are stakeholders in those tasks that you've already started.

Joe: *I see that, and I understand it. Okay, I mean we live in a work in process but I got a lot of projects going on here and how do I really help it, because I mean it seems like all of us have a lot of balls we're juggling here and someone else is maybe not managing as well and they have a lot of stuff going on too; so, what do we do?*

Jim: Well the PC statement here is that if you don't limit your Work in Process, your Work

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in Process will limit you. So the more stuff you do, the worst job you're going to do. So you have to decide, are you happy knowing that everything that you're putting out has some degree of quality issues in it?

The other thing is that when we're working with corporate clients, the main thing that we're working on is getting them organizationally to also limit their Work in Process. So organizations love organizational goals, and they'll make 5, 10, 20, 30 of them at a time and all of those organizational goals make people do something. They will spawn projects, and they will spawn tasks, and those projects will spawn tasks and that cascades down to overload the organization.

We actually start working with leaders to say, okay you can have two or three major strategic intense or major goals at a time, and then out of that will flow a certain number of projects and out of those projects will flow tasks and will keep the organization coming along.

What happens is when you limit your Work in Process, you finish things faster and then you get more done in the long run. An extreme example of this would be if I wanted to get to the grocery store in five minutes, I would get in my car and I would drive to the grocery store. If I get in two cars, I cannot drive there in two and a half minutes; that's just not how it works.

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We're treating people like that is how it works; so we overload their brains thinking...you thought if you got this report done in one week, if I gave you two reports done, you could also get them done if you get them done in two weeks. If I gave you three reports at the same time, you could get them done in the same amount of time,

We overload people, and one of the major problems here is we actually don't know what people's capacity is. It's not like we're evil, we just simply don't know what the capacity of our thinking machines are.

Joe: *I think that's very true because I mean when we look at forecasting, for example, who's ever met a forecast that really was challenging. I mean we do it at a certain extent, but it's very difficult to really judge a forecast because it's really a guesstimate, for a lack of a better word.*

Jim: Yeah well and that's just it, is that right now, we manage all of our work by guessing. All of our plans are, " I think I could do this in this amount of time..." but we don't actually know. When we do limit our Work in Process and we're able to see using a *Kanban* or some other visual control how quickly workflows, then we're able to measure that and we get cycle time metrics, throughput metrics and that says I can finish this amount of work in this amount of time which helps us estimate, helps us forecast and most of all, helps us be confident in the plans that we're creating.

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Right now, there's a tremendous amount of stress in the planning process because everybody knows that even though you think you can get that done in that amount of time, you don't know what's about to happen.

Right now, we're creating Modus Institute, it's an online school and our first class is set to launch in January. In order to get that done, I have to create content, and I believe I can get all of that content created by the 23rd of December, which is the deadline that we've set for ourselves. But if the internet goes out, if I get pneumonia, if something happens, that's going to screw up that schedule. Even though I feel confident that I could get my material done by then, there is still an amount of stress there because I don't know what's going to happen outside of my capacity.

Joe: *When we're limiting the work, I mean are we meeting deadlines? I mean because we have to limit the work based on some of those deadlines out there, so it's a little conflicting to me to manage.*

Jim: Deadlines are real. So we've set a deadline for ourselves because we launch this system, this class in January and that's a real deadline; it's something that we really need to do and if we don't do it, then we are going to pay some penalties for it. There's going to

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be a cost of delay in the release of the product that isn't the cost of delay that we want to incur. Other deadlines are very, extremely real. The IRS has a deadline of April 15th and if we don't meet that, they will come and knock on our door and they will say bad things to us and we would like that not to happen. If we don't have our annual physical annually, that is also a problem.

There are real deadlines out there; we're just really good at creating artificial deadlines that don't have to be there. We're also really good at saying, I want this to get done by this date, therefore, that is the deadline, and we haven't measured how long it actually takes us to complete things.

I know right now because of the courses I've already created that my current throughput is about three and a half days of effort for which episode that goes into one of my classes. I'm confident that over time, I will improve that, but at the moment it's three and a half days. Just estimating out the number of episodes I need by three and a half days, I know that between now and then, I can get those things done. I also know that I did not make it so that I have no slack. The actual completion day if nothing interrupts me between now and then is December 3rd to finish everything, but I know that things are going to interrupt me.

Joe: *You talk a lot about slack a lot in the book. Even though the Work in Process may be three user stories, there's kind of a fourth user story there called slack, is there not?*

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Jim: Slack is the fourth element, much like food in an element in existence. Slack is just something that any system needs to work. If you don't believe me, go find a nice, flat stretch of roadway and drive your car absolutely as fast as it can go for as long as it goes. You will get some place faster but you will get there in a much more dangerous fashion, you're much more likely to die in the process. When you run things over their capacity, they break because it's over-capacity; that's like the whole definition of over-capacity. Yet we run people over-capacity on a regular basis.

Slack sounds like you're not doing anything, but what you're actually doing is optimizing your system. So let's think of it this way, in software development, there are agile methodologies and one of the tenants of agile methodologies is that you have a delivery every two weeks. And what happens then is teams use a metric called velocity, which is essentially an attempt at measuring how much you can finish over those two weeks. And every strong team is trying to beat their high score; they're trying to get as much stuff as they possibly can get done in these two weeks' time. They frequently over commit, and when they over commit, they either don't finish everything or they finish things with lots of bugs. It's just a natural human tendency to want to constantly do better, and when our metrics are the metrics of how much did you do rather than how well did you do it, we will always be creating lots and lots of highly flawed materials.

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Joe: *Let's say a program manager where I'm managing multiple projects out there with multiple people, can I do it with Kanban? Can I do it effectively without trying to keep track of all these Kanban boards and what's going on had having memory from this one, memory to that one?*

Jim: There are as many ways to create a board as there are to think about how your work is set-up. When we've set-up *Kanban* with teams that are highly distributed and not just distributed in location but also distributed in terms of the way that they plug into the project, we need to make sure that the visualization is encouraging everybody to pay attention to what everybody else is doing. The reason that we want to do that is we want the team to understand the components of what they're building such that they make the best decisions while they're working, not just how to complete their task, but how to complete the overall project. We want to put the whole project into context.

As a manager, my keeping track of the tasks that you're working on is less important to me than making sure that everybody is constantly aligned on what the story is of what we're building, the methods by which we're building it, the deadline that it's due by, and the help and collaboration that that can give to each other in order to make work flow smoothly.

Joe: *What are some of the roadblocks I'll have in starting to assign WIP and getting started in getting a better job than what I'm doing now?*

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Jim: The roadblocks are many, and they will come from several different directions. We don't naturally limit our work in process. It seems alien when you start doing it, and you frequently end up with people doing work that they're not even aware that they're doing. So you'll come up to somebody, and you'll say, "What are you working on?" And they'll say this and you'll say, "I don't see that on the board..." and they're like, "Oh, it's not." And it's not that they're hiding and doing hidden surreptitious work, it's that they really didn't know that they were working on something else because we get distracted and we just do things and we have internal narratives that drive us in these directions. And that's fine, but the problem is that we'll do that, and then we'll find out that that little thing that we started doing has suddenly become its own project.

One of the funny things is we'll setup a personal *Kanban* for people and they'll come in in the morning and there will be eight tickets that they know they want to blow through over the course of the day, and they'll get through the end of the day and they would have only done two of them. They're like, "Oh my God, I don't get anything done!" And then we'll start talking about it and it ends up that they did four or five other things that were very important, it just wasn't on their board and they never actually thought to put it on their board.

In the Covey matrix, coming back to the Covey matrix where you have the urgent but not important tasks – this is when people come into your office and say, "Do you have a minute

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to talk about this..." and then an hour after, they leave. Maybe that interruption was bad, but maybe it wasn't. If I have four people walk into my office over the course of the day and they each talk to me for half an hour and the first three totally waste my time, but the fourth one has some idea that makes the company an extra \$7 million or makes me an extra \$7 million, that would be nice; were those other three waste?

We spend a lot of our time trying to kill off meetings and trying to stop people from interrupting us, but we're actually at work in a company to be in the company of other. We're there to collaborate and sometimes you have to go down a couple of dead-ends; you have to exercise a couple of options that don't pan out in order to find that fourth one that really does. In knowledge work, there is a cost of obtaining knowledge that is usually paid at the price of doing things that don't obtain knowledge. We can't know ahead of time what that fourth meeting is going to be. It's not like, "I only want the fourth meeting..."

Joe: *Well and that makes a lot of sense to me because I'm thinking from a sales perspective, it seems like you work and you work and you work and then out of the blue, this order just drops in and it was like, why did I do all this other work when they're going to come in this way? What was the sense in doing it?*

Jim: When things like that happen, you have to ask your question, okay when I was, doing those other things that didn't pan out, was that a valid use of my time? And maybe

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you find out that it wasn't, and you change your marketing plan, but maybe...you know I speak in a lot of conferences, you don't get paid a lot of money for speaking in conferences but you do meet people and some of those people will end up in having a working relationship with you, and that does make money. Going to the conference itself is a discovery mechanism to discover the people that you're compatible with that you can work with, and you can do good things together with. We've noticed that there are certain types of events that never led to anything, and so we've stopped doing those types of events in favor of other ones that have had a better discovery rate.

Joe: *Speaking of that, you're traveling quite extensively; it might be easier to say where you're not going in the world than where you are going. What's on the future for Jim Benson? Tell me what's coming up for you?*

Jim: Unfortunately because of Ebola, that screwed us up because I was almost...I was able to say that in the next six months, Tonianne and I would be on every continent but Antarctica, but because of Ebola, now our trip to Africa was canceled. Now we're going to be on every continent but Africa and Antarctica. We just got back from Oslo, going to Hamburg, Santiago, Bangalore, Vietnam again, we were just in Australia recently; we're definitely getting around.

What's fun and what's fascinating about that is we're helping people build systems of work

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in their companies all over the world and when we've dealt with distributed teams- in fact the first Modus Institute Class is a class in managing distributed teams. When we've dealt with distributed teams, there's always this worry that the problems between offices and companies are due to cultural issues, and that frustrates people because no one knows how to solve a cultural issue. I can't stop making you being Chinese and so therefore I kind of throw up my hands and say, oh I don't know how to communicate.

But what we found is that when we set-up visual systems and help teams build a story of their work that everybody understands, these things happen at these times, they go through these gates and here comes the work and it looks like this, these are the people that are doing the work and you have everybody updating that in real time which is not a lot of work, they're constantly in alignment and those cultural issues becomes fun; they don't become threatening.

So now, it's things like, "Wow, we have an Indian team. It would be really cool to go to India and eat for a week..." as opposed to, "Ahhh, we have an Indian team, and we can't communicate with them."

That's what's been a lot of fun is going from country to country and finding out that as the saying goes, we're more alike than different. Everybody in every country goes to work wanting to do a good job, wanting to get things done and wanting to go home and spend

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some time with their family. There is not a country in the world that is not like that. Once we get past the communication of the work and make that a non-issue, a lot of those problems just fade away.

Joe: *With the Kanban, it's great to see it even in different languages on different boards. I always get a kick out of the pictures. Has your cooking gotten any better?*

Jim: Oh my cooking never stops getting better.

Joe: *So are you adding dishes in all your travels?*

Jim: Yes, I never come back without inspiration. I have a very definite way of cooking, so you must say that no matter where I've gone, I've never lost my Nebraskaness, so I do most of my cooking on the grill. I'm always bringing flavors back; I'm always bringing ideas back. One of the beautiful things about the planet is there is no culture that doesn't have its own barbecue. In my travels, if learned to make bread on a barbeque, I've learned to make desserts on the barbeque, I've learned to make spicy things and not spicy things and kebabs and stews, and there's something about the direct heat of the flame that draws me.

Joe: *Is there anything you'd like to add that maybe I didn't ask and especially about your new book?*

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Jim: The major thing about the *Why Limit WIP* book that was compelling to me was that it had almost instant managerial adoption. So not only have managers been saying this is what I needed to know about why my team wasn't completing and this is how I can help them complete, but also companies like Lean Kit have purchased the book and actually branded it themselves to not only train their people in-house but to give to their clients and their partners, because the idea of limiting WIP is easy but understanding how it fits in the flow of work is very difficult. It's a very short book; it's just a little over a hundred pages, it's an easy read. One of the reasons why it's a novel or partly a novel is to make it read quickly.

Joe: *You did a great job of it as I went through it. So what's the best way someone can contact you?*

Jim: The best way someone can contact me is to go to Moduscooperandi.com, or you can just Google Jim Benson; that works too.

Joe: *You own your space, right?*

Jim: I definitely own myspace. There's only one other person that comes up there, whom I wish didn't. When the internet first started, and you Google Jim Benson, you only got me

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and the astronaut. But, unfortunately, the astronaut passed away of a heart attack, so now he's done and it's mostly just me, I'll put it that way. And so I'm @ourfounder on Twitter, I'm on Facebook, I'm Jim Benson in LinkedIn; I'm a very reachable fellow.

Joe: *Well, I'd like to thank you very much Jim. It was a pleasure catching up with you.*

Jim: You bet!

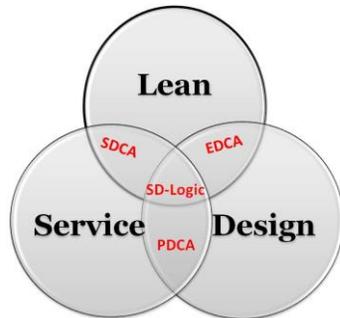
Joe: *The podcast will be available on the Business901 iTunes Store and the Business901 Blog Site. So, thanks everyone!*

Jim: Thanks so much!

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