

Attention & sustainable pace

Ed Schaefer · Version 1.0 · August 2026 · edward-schaefer.com/cards/attention-pace · Free to share

WIP-limiting the human; finishing over starting.

- Work-in-progress used to have a natural ceiling: human labor was slow to start, so it self-limited. Agents don't have that problem. Starting is nearly free now, but finishing still takes human-scale attention, so work in progress keeps climbing until it hits the one thing that never got faster: whoever's actually watching it.
- I keep two failure surfaces separate that get talked about as one. **Comprehension debt** is the pile — work whose current state I no longer actually know. **Attention** is what pays it down: the capacity to stop, re-orient, and make a call on any one piece of that pile. Treating them as the same problem hides which one is actually broken, because when attention loses ground, the pile is what grows.
- A limit that only holds because I remember to enforce it isn't much of a limit. It has to be wired in, the same way a hard spend cap has to be built to stop a runaway workload on its own.
- In practice that's:
 - a personal dispatch limit
 - an escalation budget
 - batched review windows where outputs get reviewed together in a block
 - pull-based dispatch where the next thing starts only when its lane clears
 - an actual definition of done for what an agent hands back
- If you lead a team on this: ask each person what their own dispatch limit is, and what "done" means for the work their agents hand back. If they can't answer either question, nobody is managing the constraint that actually governs their output.

What's behind this card

Where kanban's oldest idea comes from, and why it applies here, is in [Nobody Is WIP-Limiting the Human](#).

This is one of six cards today. The field guide maps seventeen practice areas, and I'm growing this set as each one earns its own depth.

This is a fit question, not a recipe. Where your team actually sits against this list, and what that's costing, is what the [Engineering Ways of Working Diagnostic](#) is built to find.