Hackathons 101

What is a hackathon?

A hackathon is an event where employees come together for a few hours, a day or two, or a week to intensely focus and collaborate on improving or creating a useable piece of software or service.

Hackathons promote:

- Team building
- A break from the day job
- Trying something new
- Getting reinvigorated by work
- Meeting other people and networking
- Building trust and relationships
- Understanding your peers better
- Morale
- Innovation

Hackathon guidelines

- Don't limit crazy ideas
- Create a space where participants can work uninterrupted
- Let participants work the way they want. Don't tell them how.
- Empower employees and make their ideas heard
- Set the expectation:
    - Ideas may not end up being major breakthroughs
    - Improvements will be incremental

Hackathon styles

Picking a hackathon style

The two most common hackathon styles are presentation and science fair. Presentation-style hackathons work best for up to 100 participants. If you expect more than 100 participants, switch to a science fair set up.

Presentation (less than 100 participants)

As the name implies, in presentation-style hackathons, teams present their project to a panel of judges and the other participants.

It's important to select a facilitator who is confident, firm, and can keep the presentation flowing smoothly. Be sure to also give your participants a set of presentation behavior guidelines so they know what certain cues mean and what their time limits are.

Keep demos short (three minutes max) to ensure a quick and thorough review of all submitted projects. Judges follow up with questions for the team, up to a maximum of two minutes. The facilitator signals the end of the presentation and Q&A by clapping.

Other cues:

- Music
- Jaws theme song
- Facilitator with authority

Have the next team waiting in the wings and ready to take the stage as the preceding team leaves it. The team on deck can get their presentation set up during the preceding team's Q&A.

Words of caution:

- It takes time for people to present, so attention spans will begin to wane
- Transitions between demos must be smooth and fast

Science fair (100-200 participants)

In this style of hackathon, teams set up tables for judges to visit. Keep in mind that you don't want to tire your judges out, so consider inviting a large team of people to preside of the judging portion of your hackathon. Teams are then assigned to judges who will pick their top projects. Those top projects then enter a second round of judging. From there, you can pull the top ten projects. Selected teams will demo their project on stage, and a winner will be selected from that top batch of teams.

As science fair set up lends itself to better face-to-face feedback and greater interaction with judges and other participants. Participants give an elevator pitch to the judges.

Your enthusiasm can dictate how excited people get about your project.

Real-time inspiration can occur with a science fair set up as participants look at others' projects and ideas.

Science fairs need a signal to disperse the crowd, like placing food, drink, or swag at the back

of the room by the doors.

Is there a time limit?
Yes. At a presentation hackathon, demos should be limited to three minutes, maximum, to ensure a thorough review of all submitted projects. Judges will talk with the team for about two minutes.

What kind of prep work should presenters do?
It is extremely important to prepare for demos. **The demo is the most important part of the presentation.** This is what the audience and judges will be there to see.

Presenters only have a limited time, usually one or two minutes, to introduce their team, summarize the issue that they're trying to solve, and talk about the solution they're trying to create. Have contestants consider making a short video to handle the part of the introduction.

Confidentiality
Have a plan in place for projects that are under NDA or other restrictions.

Hosting a hackathon

What do you want to accomplish with this Hackathon? This question should be at the forefront of your mind with each decision you make throughout the development process. Here are a few reasons why you might want to host a hackathon:

- Boost morale
- Troubleshoot software/hardware problems
- Design the next best gadget
- Team enrichment
- Give an experimental idea a test run
- Show a new area the company is focusing on

Know your audience

Your Hackathon needs an audience, and determining who will attend the event depends on a few things:

- Who are they?
- What's heir level?
- Experience?
- Role?
- Expectation?
- What kind of setup/support will they need?

How do you choose your leadership team (LT)?

Don't go it alone. Assemble a team to help organize and execute the Hackathon. Here are some things to consider while choosing your team:
- Teams typically consist of two to four dedicated volunteers
- Make sure to work with an admin who has access to rooms, budgets, ordering goodies, etc.

Who to recruit

- Administrative guru to keep you organized
- Project leader to make sure everything gets done
- Event Manager to be in charge of the facility
- Specific skill sets, like engineers, coders, QA, writer, marketer

General tips

- Work in shifts
- Put multiple people in charge of the hackathon space
- Make sure tables are easily moveable and cords do not become tripping hazards
- Make sure several people know how the presentation equipment works
- Determine the number of people you need to help you, then get twice that many people to help
- Include a variety of skillsets
- Reward your crew

- Event team might need to help people with match making for those who do not have a team
- Teams must pick a name based on a specific theme (ex. States, Countries)

Pick a date
- What works for the team you are targeting? What timeframe is optimal for them and their goals?
- What is happening within the company that might cause a conflict?

Audience
Your Hackathon needs an audience, and determining who will attend the event depends on a few things:

- Is it closed to a specific group?
- Do you have a team to help you host and run the event?
- What kind of roles/departments do you want to include?

Length
Typically, Hackathons run between 1-3 days (24- 72 hours). Some Hackathons last 4-5 days. It really boils down to your goal and your project plan. You will want to schedule enough time for teams to make real progress. Keep in mind that participants have day jobs, so be respectful of their time.

How will you fund the event?
Your Hackathon will have a few bills to cover, so you need to make sure you have a budget to dedicate to the event. Check out this sample hackathon budget, and mull over these potential cash flow options:

- Executive sponsorship
- Team budget
- Rich uncle

Items that will need to be paid for:

- Catering
- Space
- Network
- Equipment
- Tables
- Tech Crew

Make sure to set aside money for post-event stuff, like surveys, follow-up communication, and support for projects to go to the next level.

Promotion
You want people to come to your event, so you better market it. Here are some ideas:

- Give it a more informal, less corporate feel
- Appeal to non-technical roles
- Create posters geared towards certain roles (engineers, marketers, sales, and so on)

Have some celebrity judges like executive leadership or Wil Wheaton.

How will you sweeten the deal?
Providing an incentive can help drive your Hackathon because a reward is a tangible goal. You want to make sure that the Hackathon has an element of fun, perhaps a bit of a competitive edge, and recognition. Here are some ideas:

- Feedback on a project
- Monetary rewards
- Guidance on how to continue work on the project and take it to the next level
- Spotlight or feature story

Where will you host your Hackathon?

You need a space big enough to host your Hackathon. Ideally, you want a large conference room with smaller conference rooms nearby. This will make it easier to gather the entire team together while providing the resources for teams to split up. Determine your max attendance before booking anything. You could host a Hackathon in:

- A hotel conference center
- A large conference room
- Your department's meeting space

Make sure your space is ADA compliant and wheelchair accessible. Make sure you have enough room for the judge panel.

Book your hackathon space well in advance. Big spaces can have a six month wait.

What kind of set-up should the Hackathon space have?

Hackathons usually include tables and/or groups of chairs for participants to split off into groups. The furniture must be easily moveable with a space for all the cords. You will need extra equipment such as Ethernet cables on hand. You will also want to ensure that this space can accommodate the entire team for the kickoff portion of the Hackathon. Consider including a food station, as well, with beverages, snacks, plates, silverware, and napkins.

How long should my Hackathon be?

Typically, Hackathons run between one and three days (24 to 72 hours). Some Hackathons have lasted four to five days. It really boils down to your goal and your project plan. You will want to schedule enough time for teams to make real progress. Keep in mind that participants have day jobs, so be respectful of their time.

Room owner

You can't be in the hackathon space the whole time, so designate some other people who have authority over the room. That way, participants always have someone to ask questions and troubleshoot.

Furniture

Hackathons usually include tables and/or groups of chairs for participants to split off into groups. You will also want to ensure that this space can accommodate the entire team for the kickoff portion of the Hackathon.

Participant needs

Food

Remember to provide a way for participants to feed and hydrate themselves during the event.

- Provide paper plates, eating utensils, and napkins/paper towels
- Avoid stinky foods like fish and popcorn
- Provide healthy, gluten free, and vegan eating options
- Set up a drink station
  - Coffee
  - Tea

- Smoothies
- Bubble tea
- Soda
- Water
- Juice

Activities

You want your participants to feel comfortable and healthy, so they do their best work.

- Organize breaks
- Set up a place for participants to be active and get the blood moving
- Lead a group in stretches or yoga
- Hire a massage therapist to do 10-minute chair massages
- Have shower facilities available
- Encourage participants to bring a change of clothes and practice good hygiene (but don't force it)

Support

Create a support network for your participants.

- Create an alias for participants to send their questions, and make sure volunteers are available to monitor and answer questions
- Set up an actual hotline for people to call
- Have a variety of experts onsite.

Equipment

- Ethernet cables to accommodate for overloaded Wi-Fi
- Surge protectors and power strips
    - Dedicate some power strips to device charging stations
- Power cables
- Presentation equipment
    - Projector
    - VGA cable
    - HDMI cable
    - Projection screen
- A way to make announcements
    - Use cues, like a red background on a giant projection screen, to alert the crowd that something is about to be announced

Clean up

- Encourage participants to keep a tidy work area, but plan clean-up time to accommodate for participants who leave garbage behind.
- Keep trash receptacles accessible.
- Don't let garbage build up. Clean your hackathon space at least twice in a 24-hour period, and take out the trash every four hours.

Swag

Treat your participants to some sort of gift, but make sure it's high quality and something people will want to keep. Make it memorable and relate it to the event somehow. Popular items in the past:

- T-shirts or track jackets
- Branded sunglasses

T-shirts are tricky because of the sizing. If you want your participants to wear it, it has to be

unique and worth wearing. Otherwise, it's just another T-shirt for the Goodwill pile.

Bean bag wrist rest or stickers are other great ideas.

Light branding is okay, but don't get crazy with big logos.

What other resources will you need?
We've compiled a list of FAQs, templates, and samples for easy reference.

- Preparation steps
- Sample Agenda
- Judging a hackathon
- Participant survival guide
- Participant checklist

Preparation steps

Task	Owner	Status	Deadline
Location:			
Dates:			
Build leadership team			
Determine hackathon goal and targeted audience			
Setup planning meetings			
Set a date and determine length of event (AS: At this time you need to secure space because sometimes space will dictate when you host the event.)			
Build budget for event			
Secure Funding			
Secure Space			
Determine equipment and furniture needs and set up rentals			
Build Registration Site with all information & Sign up form			
Promote event			
Put together food orders/menus & total costs			
Send out Invite email with link to site and sign up page			
Send out Judge Requests & Invites			
Create T-shirt design			
Send Request for Volunteers			
Order T-Shirts			
Create all signs needed in Signage plan with template			
Confirm headcount and order food (lunches for judges, staff, & Volunteers - food for award party)			
Create Master Event Plan			
Costco run for Presenter snacks for day of (Presenter or catering?			
Post-event clean-up			
Send Attendee Thank You and Survey			
Send Wrap-Up Mail, Thank You, and Participant Survey			
Send Judges & Sponsor Thank You			
Send Volunteer Thank You			
Archive pictures, event pages, projects, and data			
Update Website with Recap and Winners etc.			
Update Yammer with pictures and winners			

Sample Agenda

Day #1

8:00 AM – Breakfast & Registration

9:00 AM – Hackathon starts

9:15 AM – Overview

9:50 AM – Tools/services/mentor review/talks (optional)

11:00 AM – Pitches

12:00 PM – Lunch & form teams

3:00 PM – Mentor check-ins

6:00 PM – Optional reception or science fair

Work as late as you want!

Day #2

9:00 AM – Breakfast & tech talk (optional)

9:30 AM – Team Breakouts & Mentor Check-ins

12:00 PM – Lunch

12:45 PM – Team breakouts & mentor check-ins

6:00 PM – Dinner

Work as late as you want!

Day #3

9:00 AM – Breakfast & team breakouts

10:00 AM - Practice pitch & mentor check-ins

12:00 PM – Lunch

1:00 PM – Presentation Prep (dry run, equipment set-ups)

3:15 PM – Presentations (5 minutes to present, 2 minutes Q&A from judges)

4:30 PM - Announce winners & People's Choice Award

5:15 PM – Wrap-up party!

Judging a hackathon

If you're reading this, you've either been asked to judge a hackathon, or you're wondering what it would be like to judge. Consider it an honor, and look upon this experience with positivity and delight. You're about to see some amazing teamwork and ideas.

How should I prepare?

- Be well-rested the day of the event.
- Bring note-taking tools.
- Commit to evaluating each project with an equal weight.
- Bring healthy snacks and water to stay fueled and hydrated.
- Wear comfortable clothes and shoes.
- Talk to the host or the host's team if you if have questions or special requests

If you're judging at a science fair/expo-style hackathon, wear comfortable shoes. You might be on your feet for a while.

Questions should work both ways, so if you have any curiosities about the event, ask the host or the host's team.

What kind of criteria should I consider when judging a project?

Judging criteria should be clearly stated to the judges and the participants. Go here for an example.

The following is only a suggestion.

Evaluate each entry out of a total of 30 points.

- 10 points for innovation/originality
- 10 points for user value proposition or business viability
- 10 points for complexity-effort

Points Guidance	Innovation/Originality	User/business value	Complexity/effort
1-3	Existing idea, but an improvement on an existing feature	Targets a specific segment of our users, but not all. Not clear if this will provide true value to users.	Hack is simple and can be accomplished by a single engineer.
4-6	Known problem, but new way of solving it.	May be slightly ahead of the market today, something we would definitely consider for the product. Saves time for engineers/improves productivity.	Good use of current technologies; smart in leveraging existing implementation and medium level of coding.
7-10	Completely new idea providing differentiation in the product.	Big problem we have today or in the near future.	Lot of coding to get this hack done; used new technology within Microsoft/industry.

Here are some other suggestions from others:

What makes a good hack by SendGrid (see the full article here)

To understand what makes a good hack, you must determine the [purpose of a hackathon](#). At the end of the day, a hackathon is meant to bring developers together and have them build something. Hopefully, the developers learn something, meet new people, and have a good time in the process. By understanding that, determining what makes a good hack becomes clear: it's something that helps developers achieve the purpose of the hackathon. To me, a good hack is one that is technically impressive and receives some sort of exclamation after seeing it, "nifty!" *That's it.*

With what makes a good hack in mind, the criteria becomes simple:

- Technical Difficulty
- Impressiveness
- If your hackathon has a theme, you may also have the theme as part of the criteria.

Three criteria for judging hackathons (see the full article from Mukund Mohan [here](#))

- How **unique & interesting** is the idea given the constraints of the hackathon
- How **close to "product"** has the hack been over the weekend and
- How **creative have the developers been** in their implementation

What else should I know about being a judge?

During presentation-style hackathons—or any hackathon where you sit on a panel of judges—you will only have a couple minutes to talk with the team after they've demonstrated their project. Be sure to ask clear, concise questions. Take notes during the demo so you have your questions prepared.

Even if you're bursting with questions, give your fellow judges an opportunity to provide feedback or request more information from the presenting team.

Participant survival guide

Get the most of out of Hackathons

Hackathons can be amazing opportunities for networking, collaboration, and innovation, but they can also be overwhelming and stressful. Whether you're trying it out for the first time, or are veteran, check out these tips for successful and fun attendance.

For newcomers

Don't be intimidated or worry that you're crashing a party or club. Collaboration is the core of the hackathon, and people want to hear your ideas. You are on an even playing field, even if you're teaming with veterans, because everyone attends a hackathon to work together on creative and innovative ideas. Everyone wants to be a part of something cool and clever—that too, is at the heart of the hackathon.

Do some prep work beforehand. Come to the hackathon with an idea, or several ideas, to pitch. But don't do the actual work ahead of time—that's bad manners!

Clear your schedule

Don't double-book yourself during a hackathon. Clear your schedule and tie up any loose ends like deliverables.

Stay healthy

Make sure to stay hydrated and fed. Low blood sugar is productivity's natural enemy!

Bring overnight items if you plan on staying overnight or for long periods of time, like toiletries and a change of clothes. Make sure you'll be comfortable for the length of the hackathon.

Practice good hygiene. Remember to shower and brush your teeth.

Take breaks often. Do some stretches or yoga.

Make sure your equipment fits your own personal needs. Bring your own when necessary.

What can a hackathon do for you?
- Work with others in a different way
- Increase your confidence
- Network
- Improve relationships in and outside of your team
- Create something amazing

Get to know your itinerary

Get comfortable with the hackathon's schedule so you know when, where, and what is happening at all times. Many hackathons follow a general format:

1. Pitches
2. Team formation
3. Hack time
4. Presentation
5. Critiques

Pitches

During this time, participants share their project pitches, although some hackathons pre-screen. Don't be scared to present your idea, even if it's just a scrap of a full-formed notion, to hackathon attendees. Hackathons are all about supportive collaboration, and everyone wants to have a positive experience.

Even if you don't have an idea to present, think about how to break the ice and introduce yourself to others. Hackathons are a great place to network, so be prepared to share your interests, skills, and hackathon goals with your peers.

If your idea doesn't get selected for a hackathon, it's okay to be frustrated—but don't dwell. Instead, accept that your idea might require more work. After the hackathon wraps up, take your idea home and improve it. How can you make your idea something that people will get really excited about?

Team forming

Teams typically form once the pitches have completed, so take the opportunity to introduce yourself to other attendees. Be friendly! But also have a goal in mind as you decide who to team up with over the next day or five. You might have your sights set on working with someone you've always wanted to collaborate with, or you might just be ready to network outside of the office. You get to decide who you work with during the hackathon, so make the most of it.

Hack time

This phase is when the real "work" gets done, and it's the central reason for the hackathon. You will want to enter this phase of the event with a realistic presentation goal. Remember that your goal is not to have something ready to ship by the end of the event. Overambitious ideas might leave you presenting a PowerPoint deck instead of a prototype.

Solid project and time management is often the key to a successful hackathon, so pace yourself and your team. Use your resources wisely.

You are volunteering your time, so remember that you have full power over how you spend it. Figure out how you work best, be it working for 24 hours straight or heading out at 5pm so you have time to eat dinner with your family. Ultimately, what effort you put into the hackathon will determine how much you get out of the experience.

Don't forget to communicate your work style with your colleagues, and remember to take care of yourself. If you need a snack, eat! If you need a break, take one!

Presentation

Hack time is over, and now it's time to present your prototype, demo, or slideshow. A demo is more powerful than a video, and a video is more powerful than a PowerPoint presentation. As mentioned above, it's important to come into the hackathon with a realistic goal in mind because you want to have something to show after all that hard work. New teams often stumble here due to overambitious goals and forget that they need to present something at the end of the event.

It is extremely important to prepare for your demo. You only have a limited time, usually one or two minutes, to introduce your team, summarize the issue that you're trying to solve, and talk about the solution you're trying to create. Consider making a short video to handle the part of the introduction.

Then, you have three minutes to demo your prototype. **Your demo is the most important part of your presentation.** This is what the audience and judges are here to see.

Critiques

Once the presentations are complete, a panel of judges will review and critique your work. Many hackathon hosts offer rewards and recognition during this phase. Even if your hackathon comes with tangible rewards, make sure to give yourself a pat on the back. You put yourself out there, committed yourself to a team, and you worked together to create something. That's a big accomplishment!

Participant checklist

❑ Register for the hackathon.

❑ Find a team

❑ Prepare pitches and ideas ahead of time.

❑ Prepare an "elevator pitch" about yourself, your interests, your hackathon goals, and your skill sets.

❑ Pack necessary toiletries and change of clothes.

❑ Clear your schedule.

❑ Familiarize yourself with the hackathon itinerary.

❑ Communicate your work preferences and style to your hack team.

❑ Enjoy yourself!

It's time to hack!

Time is of the essence so be prepared to take steps to help keep things moving

- Limit distractions
- Hold to deadlines
- Build in mechanisms for keeping things moving

Team communication

- Email participants directly but for privacy issues the registration list cannot be sent out to anyone
- Create a group on Yammer
- Build SharePoint for all of your info
- Consider using Distribution Groups to let folks know what you're up to

Determining the winning project

Judging

- Appointing judges to view demos works well for hackathons with 100 or fewer participants. You can also use judges at a science fair-style hackathon.
- Select celebrity judges who are expects in the field if you can. (If you can't, deciding who to select is important and should be well though through.)
- Make sure your judges have a good time and have everything they need.

Voting

Voting is hard to pull off and isn't entirely recommended. Voting can often be a popularity contest, and hackathons should be "won" based on merit.

If you decide to do voting, there are a few ways to do it:

- You can build an app that lets you vote with your phone
- Go old school, and give each person five cards and let them drop them in the boxes of the projects they like (this works for the science fair approach).
- Allow online voting but know that the system can be rigged by enterprising hackers. ☺

Rewards and recognition

Providing an incentive can help drive your Hackathon because a reward is a tangible goal. You want to make sure that the Hackathon has an element of fun, perhaps a bit of a competitive edge, and recognition. Here are some ideas:

- Feedback on a project
- Monetary rewards
- Spotlight in newsletter

Post-event stuff

Follow up with your participants after the hackathon has ended. There's a wealth of information to collect, especially if you want to run another hackathon.

Communication
- Hand out a card or flyer at the end of the event
- Send a wrap-up email
- Conduct a survey to learn from your participants
  - Try to make it a three-question survey with simple questions.
  - Incentivize it if you can to guarantee some participation
  - Consider entering them in a contest if they take the survey/conduct a random drawing while people are still there to more people to fill out the survey

What happens to the projects?
- Give your participants some tips about how to proceed with their project after the event has concluded.
- Ask your leadership to make time to review the winning projects
- Offer the winners time with your leader(s)
- Build a mechanism to send the best projects to the teams at Microsoft that would work on that technology

If a follow up hackathon is part of your plans, have those plans in motion by the end of the hackathon so participants know what's next as they head out the door.