

How to Host a HACKATHON



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How to Hold a Hackathon

The holy grail of innovation is opportunity and training employees to identify it. Looking into the future and seeing what isn't...*but could be*. This is how companies build a long-term advantage that puts competitors at bay, creates barriers to entry, and puts customers and their needs at the heart of the work they do.

The GE Global Innovation Barometer reports that nearly three in four executives worldwide believe that they face a lack of skills in their industry. And 64 percent say this problem restricts their ability to innovate, a challenge that has increased over time.

Employees are considered to be the most crucial element to innovation success, yet a gap in their skills is the top worry that business leaders have. Finding and keeping the right talent is just as important as investing in the employees you already have. You need to create an environment in which they learn to build their skills to become fluent innovators.

Hackathons are the incubators of innovative thinking.

These events are where ideas come to life and have an opportunity to see how they can have an impact. A hackathon brings people with diverse backgrounds together to look at problems from many different perspectives and generate new ideas. It's in this environment that teams can collaborate across departments, expand creativity, exercise open thinking, and nurture inspiration. A hackathon is also the risk-free test kitchen for good ideas.

What's a Hackathon?

Hackathons started in the IT world where computer programmers came together, laptops in hand, to work on ideas they were passionate about. With a 24-hour window, small groups of people collaborated on projects that gave them three motivations that author Daniel Pink points out matter most to any individual:

- **Autonomy.** Each person and team wanted the independence to direct work on ideas they were excited about. Giving the people space to do this runs counter to how most management teams think. But giving them autonomy to go after what interested them most heightened the emotional engagement they had for their work.
- **Mastery.** Who has time in the day-to-day grind to really get better at the work they do? Hardly anyone. Setting time aside for hackathons meant that people



had dedicated opportunities to improve their personal skills and see professional progress. This helped build their inner drive to do all work better.

- **Purpose.** People are intrinsically motivated to do work that serves a higher purpose. These teams saw hackathons as time earmarked to work on ideas that matter not only to them, but to the larger organization.

Whether or not teams actually moved forward with new ideas that came out of these events wasn't the point (if it did...*BONUS!*). Instead, IT leaders saw an immediate uptick in morale and collaboration. Being put into a situation in which each was expected to share their opinions, talk through ideas, and have something to present at the end of the hackathon was the push they needed to identify themselves as innovators.

Today, the use of hackathons is spreading outside of IT departments. The benefits that tech teams experience are the same that leaders in all areas of the business want to draw from their own lineup.

And, with well-planned and executed hackathons, they'll be able to.

Expanding Hackathons

Broader-based hackathons appeal to people from across an organization. These events have the same common goals as those of IT teams: To support autonomy so employees take greater ownership of their ideas; to give them time to master personal and professional skills; and provide space to think about the bigger picture and purpose of their work. Along the way, team leaders also notice:

- More people are invited and welcomed into the process, which builds excitement for new ideas, change, their co-workers, and the overall company.
- That everybody learns from each other, which helps break down operational and mental silos.
- The depth at which people dig into unconventional answers to problems and uncover new opportunities

Hacking, by definition, means to cut through. Your goal is to cut through the barriers that keep people in silos and build new, fun, socially rewarding relationships. The ideal team size of five to seven gives everyone the best use of people, talents, and experiences. If you have smaller groups, think about pairing up or creating hybrid teams where people can tap into special skills across projects, such as legal, programming, writing, presentation, or other business expertise.



Gather and Manage Ideas

A few weeks before the event, send an email to all possible participants about the date so they can reserve it on their calendar. Ask them to submit ideas for projects to work on during the hackathon. Ask them to think of areas of the business they have always been curious about or see an opportunity to improve. Don't worry about an idea being 'right' or 'wrong', this exercise is purely to gather as many suggestions as possible.

To decide which projects people will work on the day of the hackathon, give everyone a chance to sign up for which projects catch their attention. This can be done with something as simple as a shared spreadsheet or a board in a common area in your office that lets people write an elevator pitch for their idea, then others can put their name down to be a part of that team. It's a good idea to have each person list several things they would like to contribute—and this can go well beyond what they do at work every day. Some volunteers may say they just want to be a part of the event. Then project leads can recruit them, or they can help with logistics.

By showing interest in a project, people vote by default for the importance of it. Take time to review the size and makeup of teams. You may need to ask some leading questions if one team is heavily weighted toward one skill, such as all product or finance. By the end of the hackathon, each team will need to present a cohesive presentation, which means they need input from a range of people while they develop the idea.

Sometimes it helps to include a leader who's close to the problem to be on the team. Their familiarity with the situation might help lead everyone through the process with fewer hiccups. When you look for a leader, don't think you have to go for the highest-ranking person. In fact, enthusiasm and a willingness to dig in and get their hands dirty outweighs experience every time. In most situations, project leads happen naturally because of the person's interest in a topic.

Add personality and energy to teams by letting each one pick a name. Hoops I Did it Again, Goal Diggers, and Sons of Pitches add memorability to the day.

Location

The most important thing to know about the location of a hackathon is that everyone is together. To give people a boost of excitement, choose a place that's outside of the normal work environment, like a common area or cafeteria. Think about room for drinks, food being brought in, music to keep the energy going, and people having



space to move around and post their work. Remember, a hackathon is a 24-hour event. During planning, think about the dynamics of groups and how they'll want to interact. Some people may want time and room to break off and do some independent thinking. Make sure your location allows for all of this.

You'll need room for:

- **Tables.** Round tables are ideal for hackathons. The shape gives everyone the chance to easily share and work on ideas - which is what the event is all about. Think King Arthur and those Knights!
- **Presentation space.** Whether it's wall space to hang materials or plenty of surface area, make sure that teams have room to spread out, work through and demonstrate the potential of their ideas.
- **Support materials.** Do you need white boards brought in? Projectors and screens?

A hackathon delivers its results because of the ability to sit across from your teammates and work closely together. Group and side conversations are the dynamic you want. Hackathons are successful because they are organic events where one comment leads to another, and another leading to everyone working in sync toward a new and innovative outcome. Creating time and space for coworkers who understand the company and its issues so they can spend time together brainstorming ideas is the key to making an event like this work well.

Getting Down to Work

Your team's here, now it's time to get down to the business of hacking. A fun way to kick off this part of the event is to hand out promotional material - stickers, T-Shirts, or other giveaways.

This will be a great day for your teams as they work with others across the company to hear different approaches to solve a problem and meet their goal. As the facilitator, your role is to lead people to think, act, and do what they are interested in.

How each team tackles the problem and comes up with a solution is part of the learning process. You may feel inclined to create structure and guidelines, but don't cave to this. Be observant, and if you see teams struggling, or someone dominating a conversation, step in and help facilitate next steps. Ask quieter team members for their input, or point the group back to the focus of the problem.



Every couple of hours infuse a change that keeps the energy going. It could be a late-night cookie delivery tray, a walk around the parking lot, change of music genre, 10-minute trivia contest...anything to break the rhythm and routine or make them feel special. You could save a special give away for the mid-point, so that only the people who stuck it out during the long hours have the reward to wear or show with pride.

Remind teams regularly that at the end of the hackathon, *everyone* in the group needs to stand up and be part of their presentation. Make sure they budget time to put it together and, if possible, do a couple of run-throughs to practice. Presentations can include speeches, PowerPoint, videos, skits, or other creative ways to explain their ideas, their innovative approach, and how it solves the problem. It's a good idea to keep presentations to around 10 minutes. This gives each team enough time for a compelling presentation and then take a couple of questions from the audience. You don't want your audience to get bored.

Speaking of the audience, invite as many people as you can from the company. You want them to hear the pitches, get excited, and talk forward the energy into their own work. Find a few people willing to be the judging committee for the pitches—*think Shark Tank!* Of course, each team will want to win, but the key word here is *fun*. The more respected and higher ranking the judges, the more credence the hackathon earns. Play up their part as well, but again, it's all about the fun.

By the time teams gets to the stage, everyone has already won. Remember, the goal of a hackathon is to support people's autonomy, mastery of skills, and ability to work toward a higher purpose. However, adding humor to the award ceremony adds to the fun. For example, you could give awards for...

- The most unusual project
- The most collaborative idea
- The most creative presentation
- The most sleep-deprived team
- The highest number of pizzas eaten by a team
- The most caffeine consumed
- You may even make up the awards as you go along

Post-Mortem

A post-mortem is a simple, step-by-step review of your event. You can even front load this by putting up a feedback board during your hackathon, and let people give feedback in the moment. For example, someone may say you need gluten-free food



options, more sticky notes, etc. These things are good to capture during your hackathon because you may not be aware of them after the fact.

Your goal is to bring the key players who helped design and run the event together to look at each aspect of what worked and what could improve. What were the high and low points? Was it too hot or too cold? Were the teams balanced with the right combination of talents? How can you make the next hackathon better? What suggestions would you make to a future team? All of these things matter.

By identifying the hits and misses you will make your next hackathon event more even successful.

Your Opportunity

Hackathons are genuinely a great tool to build autonomy, master personal and professional skills, and reinforce a sense of purpose. They help change the way your teams interact and work across the company. People who participate will gain a new understanding of teamwork and how they can use their newly developed skills in their everyday work. Regardless of the results of the event, teaching people to work collaboratively and innovate is an amazing achievement on its own.

Work With Us



Carla Johnson and her team have worked with startups, Fortune 100 companies and every size in between. They've helped executives and leaders understand their starting points, design their innovation journey, and deliver the research, training, advice and experiences to help them make innovation a mindset. Through partnerships, clients learn the impact that a broader innovation practice has on business, and the path to creating and sustaining a culture that welcomes new ideas, encourages experimentation, and rewards critical thinking.

This is how companies of all size become genuinely nimble, passionate, innovative powerhouses that deliver extraordinary outcomes in any industry and under any market condition. Look for her latest book, [*RE:Think Innovation*](#), and visit www.carlajohnson.co for more information or to get in touch.