



# HACKATHONS FUEL INNOVATION

"AMATEURS TALK STRATEGY. PROFESSIONALS TALK LOGISTICS."

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**W**hen ten OpenBSD developers got together in a house in Calgary, Alberta in 1999 to innovate in what is recognized as one of the earliest intentional hackathons, they pioneered a practice that would lead to myriad technological breakthroughs over the following decades. Today, hackathons are well-attended, global events that attract the crème de la crème of the developer community.

Hackathons create the perfect mix of environmental and psychological factors necessary to fuel innovation, accelerate learning, and drive rapid results. Because the events are voluntary and recreational, the participants are usually quite passionate about what they do. These developers and technology enthusiasts demonstrate some of the best applications and improvisations of existing technologies, processes, and ideas for further innovation. A good hackathon usually concludes with the development of a tangible, low-fidelity product or prototype within the scheduled period. Hour-on-hour, these are very high productivity events.

## BEFORE: PLAN AND PREPARE

Behind every well-executed, well-attended hackathon are hours of planning. From deciding the event venue to setting a theme, finalizing the format, and ensuring that the participants have access to the right software and hardware, the secret to a successful hackathon lies in the details.

### 1 Identify a Theme

Key to any hackathon is the problem statement or central theme of the event. Pain points within your own company are a great place to start—look for time-consuming processes, repetitive tasks, or practices that require extensive manual intervention. Discussions, interviews, and questionnaires are all helpful tools to triage, vet, and prioritize your hackathon topic.

### 2 Get Sponsored

Without an executive sponsor, it will be difficult to organize an event that attracts top talent. To find a sponsor, you must pitch a product idea or challenge that is both appealing and makes sense from a business perspective.

### 3 Define Success and Lay Ground Rules

You must set expectations for hackathon participants and judges alike. This means clearly defining success by creating a rubric to evaluate teams' performances and outcomes. These parameters must be specific, measurable, actionable, relevant, and time bound. With this foundation, you must build a framework for variables such as team structure and ownership of topics.

A hackathon is a place for conversation to flow frankly and freely, where no idea or question is too small. To facilitate open and safe communication, it is essential to compile a team of SMEs and technical advisors to answer questions, guide participants, and assess outputs. This team should be strictly objective and neutral. SMEs should avoid caging creativity or restricting off-course ventures—encouraging unconventional approaches is the essence of these events.

## DURING: UNLEASH CREATIVITY

Once your hackathon begins, encourage participants to test the waters beyond the original question. The ultimate objective of a hackathon is not answering the problem statement or central question, but solving the problem at hand.

### 1 Set the Stage

Hackathons bring a wide array of developers, programmers, and coders under one roof and provide them free rein to bring their ideas to life within a set period. In practice, the events often feel more like Comic-Con than an enterprise retreat.

Over time, hackathons have also become increasingly thematic in nature, often extending beyond physical spaces. As digital innovations break new ground every day, a hackathon environment can even include an online forum and new virtual platforms as well. Ultimately, the idea is to make participants feel comfortable and ensure that cutting edge technological innovation is supported in a semi-formal environment.

### 2 Remind Teams to Document

Participating teams must document their assumptions, key findings, recommendations, workflows, wireframes, and UI/UX designs. They should be able to mine data and churn relevant insights in real time using advanced tools and methodologies. Similarly, a mock-up of how the minimum viable product (MVP) becomes fully operable within the larger scheme of operations should be mandatory. This will establish that the output will yield the expected results when fully developed and integrated into the system.



## AFTER: REAP THE HARVEST

The event is over. The prototype is ready and approved. The hackathon has successfully concluded. Or has it?

While hackathons provide a platform for recognizing talent and even creating start-up founders, the goal is to birth ideas that change the business. Hackathons provide a space for innovators to collaborate with each other and deliver real, consumable outputs outside the bounds of corporate regulations and employer policies. So, after the hackathon is the time to reap the harvest.

### 1 Pilot the MVP

Identify the near-term application of the MVP and conduct a pilot run. The pilot should be robust enough to test the prototype's value against pre-defined success criteria and reveal the requirements for high-level investments and operating-model implications.

### 2 Create a Hackathon-Inspired Culture

The intrinsic value of a hackathon does not lie solely in its resulting innovations. While the creation of any new product, service, or processes is key to a successful hackathon, a greater victory lies in embedding a hackathon-inspired culture within development teams.

By incorporating hackathon-inspired lessons into regular workflows, organizations will be surprised how much more they can achieve.

## IN CONCLUSION

The popular messaging apps GroupMe and Gmail and the mobile app development framework Apache Cordova have something interesting in common. Yes, they are owned by technology behemoths—Microsoft, Google, and Adobe, respectively—but more importantly, all three were founded as a direct result of hackathons.

Businesses, government agencies, and even social collectives have increasingly embraced hackathons as a powerful means to fast-track innovation, reduce turnaround time, and drive organizational agility. These events are key for pushing technology into new paradigms now and into the future.

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