

# Designing Corporate Hackathons with a Purpose

## The Future of Software Development

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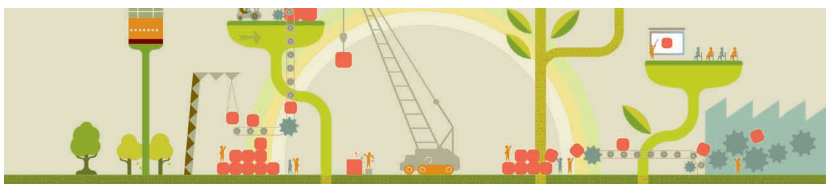
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*// In hackathons, small teams work over a specified period to complete a project of interest. Hackathons have become popular as a means to surface and prototype innovative and creative ideas for products, but their impact often goes beyond product innovation. //*



**BASED ON OUR** empirical studies of 10 hackathons held by scientific communities, a corporation, and universities as well as the review of published literature, we discuss that hackathons can be organized around goals such as enriching social networks, facilitating collaborative learning, and workforce development. We also discuss design choices that can scaffold the organization of hackathons and their tradeoffs. Design choices include identifying a suitable mixture of attendee skills, the selection process for projects and teams, and whether to hold a competitive or collaborative event. Hackathons can achieve multiple goals if designed carefully.

To remain competitive in the global market, tech companies are required constantly to deliver new products and services that offer value to their customers. Many of these companies have adopted various development strategies not only to shorten the product development cycle but also to optimize the capabilities of developers to create innovative products and features. As a consequence, the way that developers organize their efforts is constantly evolving, in response to new business needs and technical changes. Examples of such changes are global or distributed development, agile teams, and DevOps deployment practices.

Hackathons are a relatively new form of organizing for product innovation that is taking on increased importance and, in fact, seems to have become a part of the development work of nearly every major tech company and university computer science environment. Hackathons

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started as competitive events for young developers in the mid to late 2000s but were quickly adopted in different domains such as education<sup>9</sup> and civic engagement<sup>10</sup> and in corporations of all sizes. In general, hackathons are time-bounded events, typically of two to five days, during which people gather together and form teams, each of which attempts to complete a project of interest to them.<sup>4,14</sup> The teams are usually collocated and often composed of people with diverse backgrounds, experience, and expertise. In a corporate hackathon, employees generally form teams of three to five people and work intensively, primarily to produce working prototypes of ideas that could be

- The work hours are relatively focused and interruption-free.
- They occur outside the usual constraints of processes, goals, and management.
- They provide the opportunity to run a project, assess its feasibility, and uncover potential pitfalls with minimal risk to daily operations.
- Participants work on something they are passionate about.

In addition to hackathons' potential to foster innovation,<sup>1</sup> they may also be used to reduce stovepiping by creating new social connections,<sup>7</sup> provide learning opportunities,<sup>5</sup> and develop and exercise new technical and leadership skills in a low-risk

afterward.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, none of the research to date compares hackathons across different design elements to evaluate their effectiveness with respect to the intended goals of the events.

In this article, we first discuss a number of goals around which a hackathon can be organized and then describe some of the design choices that can foster achieving such goals and key design tradeoffs. As with all events where people gather, there are the usual needs for space, food, facilities, promotional material, and more. Since these are not specific to hackathons (except perhaps for a greater demand for electricity and bandwidth), we will focus only on hackathon-specific choices. Our discussion is based on our empirical studies of 10 hackathons, including hackathons by scientific communities, a very large-scale internal corporate hackathon, and university hackathons. As part of our research, we have attended and ethnographically observed hackathons, completed 103 interviews with organizers and participants, and administered four posthackathon surveys. We have also reviewed the published literature directed to both researchers and practitioners and have integrated this information into our results. Although we draw on experience and literature representing a variety of hackathon types, here we narrow our focus to corporate hackathons since they are the most expensive, hold the greatest promise for commercial advantage, and present unique problems given their embeddedness in a corporate context.

## Hackathons are a relatively new form of organizing for product innovation.

integrated into existing products or serve as a basis for new products or services.<sup>1</sup> One such example is Microsoft's annual OneWeek global hackathon. Every year in the summer, Microsoft employees are given the opportunity to leave their day-to-day jobs for a week (about 18,000 did so in 2017), team up with others, and hack on a project of the team's choosing. Other tech companies such as Facebook and Google also run similar company-wide hackathons each year as well as multiple smaller internal and external hackathons.<sup>1</sup>

Hackathons generally combine several features that foster innovation. For example:

- They often bring together people with diverse expertise and experience.

environment. Hackathons can serve many different goals, and the relative importance of these goals can vary dramatically from one company to the next and from one hackathon to the next.

Hackathons can also be designed in many different ways. They may, for example, provide different kinds of incentives and have widely varying processes for selecting projects and teams. For those contemplating hackathons, one important question to ask is: How can hackathons be designed to achieve specific goals? Although one can easily find information online about how to organize a hackathon,<sup>8,12</sup> most of the information is based solely on the organization of one specific style of event and does not consider the continuation of hackathon projects

## Goals: Organizational and Personal

Designing an effective hackathon involves a careful consideration of goals

set out by both organizers and participants. The organizers need to be aware that their goals for hackathons may, and often will, be different from those of participants. Failure to consider a possible divergence in goals may result in not being able to recruit or to leverage the fullest potential of participants and may detract from participant satisfaction and outcome quality.

Some of the common goals for corporate hackathon organizers include the following:

- *Enrich intracompany networks and reduce stovepiping:* Motivate and provide an opportunity for people from different parts of the company and on different levels of seniority, who are unlikely to have opportunities to communicate and work together, to form teams and collaborate.
- *Change the culture within the company:* Encourage people to contribute to initiatives that are outside of the scope of their regular work and encourage creativity and outside-of-the-box thinking.
- *Workforce development:* Encourage participants to explore new roles like product or project managers and expand their technical skill set by facilitating a self-driven and collaborative learning environment.
- *External image:* Show potential future employees that the company is innovative and open to change.

In comparison with organizers' goals, participants might have similar as well as different goals in mind:

- *Having fun:* Escape the constraints of company product plans and preset development

processes and allow participants to work at their own pace on things they care about.

- *Learning:* Learn new technologies and tools, more about their current projects, and other skills such as collaboration, leadership, and project management.
- *Winning prizes:* Achieve monetary or other prizes such as recognition by leadership and/or their peers.
- *Expanding personal networks:* Grow individual professional networks within the company beyond the boundaries of their everyday work.

### Fostering Competition

One key choice has to do with incentives structured either to favor competing or cooperating. People generally take part voluntarily in hackathons, but various design features and incentives can shape their participation in either a competitive or cooperative direction. Collaborative hackathons are typically designed to enhance interaction among participants, thereby establishing or deepening connections that can foster longer-term collaboration post-hackathon.<sup>7</sup> This can be achieved by facilitating interteam interactions with shared or interdependent goals

Collaborative hackathons are typically designed to enhance interaction among participants.

- *Fostering their career:* Impress current managers through taking on new roles during the hackathon or draw other departments' attention to a participant's skills.
- *Getting the needed work done:* Take advantage of this opportunity to pursue a project that is a high priority to an individual or team but a low priority to managers allocating resources.

### Design Choices

In this section, we elaborate on a set of core design choices that can be used to shape the design of hackathons for particular purposes and describe key design tradeoffs. Table 1 summarizes the design choices and supportive goals in the context of a corporate hackathon.

and/or injecting social elements into the hackathon agenda.<sup>3</sup>

One common approach used in collaborative-style hackathons is having "unconference" sessions<sup>13</sup> during which participants give short technical briefings or pitch project ideas. Afterward, participants can be encouraged to wander around the room, discuss with the owner of an idea that they are interested in, and offer suggestions. This situation increases the chance of participants meeting new people and generating cross-pollination among ideas. Another approach is team fluidity where participants switch between teams at specified intervals, which allows members to meet others and exchange information about their projects.<sup>10</sup> However, our interview data suggest that this approach might lead to

Table 1. A summary of hackathon design choices and related goals.

Design choices	Strategies	Organizational goals	Personal goals
Collaboration versus competition	<b>Collaboration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate shared or interdependent goals</li> <li>Integrate social elements and unconference sessions</li> <li>Enable team switching at predefined intervals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enrich intracompany networks and reduce stovepiping</li> <li>Collaborative learning</li> <li>Change the culture within the company</li> <li>Improve external image</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand one's personal network</li> <li>Learn</li> <li>Foster career</li> <li>Have for all fun</li> </ul>
	<b>Competition</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compete for prizes</li> <li>Prizes range from cash to opportunities for continued development of winning ideas</li> <li>Subject matter experts are usually invited as judges</li> <li>Awards range from winners of challenges to popularity awards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product innovation</li> <li>Change the culture within the company</li> <li>Improve external image</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Win prizes</li> <li>Get the needed work done</li> <li>Foster career</li> <li>Have for all fun</li> </ul>
Attracting attendees with relevant skill sets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify individuals who are enthusiastic about hackathons</li> <li>Distribute promotional materials timely and effectively</li> <li>Use various invitation approaches: incentives, targeted invitation, and participant selection using software tools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product innovation</li> <li>Collaborative learning</li> <li>Workforce development</li> <li>Advance technical work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand one's personal network</li> <li>Learn</li> <li>Have for all fun</li> <li>Get the needed work done</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mentoring, tutorial sessions, and brainstorming</li> <li>A manageable ratio of (at least 2:1) novices to advanced team members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage diversity and inclusion</li> <li>Lower the barrier to participation of novices</li> <li>Collaborative and spontaneous learning</li> <li>Workforce development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn</li> <li>Foster career</li> </ul>
Selection of projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants propose own project ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product innovation</li> <li>Encourage a sense of autonomy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creativity and innovation</li> <li>Get the needed work done</li> <li>Learn</li> <li>Foster career</li> <li>Have for all fun</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants pick organizers' proposed project ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative learning</li> <li>Workforce development</li> <li>Progress in targeted areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster career</li> <li>Learn</li> </ul>
Team formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-organization of teams by recruiting members with required skills</li> <li>Tools such as Hackbox are essential to have a better mix of skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enrich intracompany networks and reduce stovepiping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand one's personal network</li> <li>Foster career</li> <li>Have for all fun</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Team assignment by organizers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advance technical work</li> <li>Collaborative learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster career</li> <li>Learn</li> </ul>
Prework before or at the event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Premeetings, where teams can divide the work into manageable tasks, assign roles, and pretest technologies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve team efficiency by alleviating a slow-start problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Win prizes</li> <li>Expand one's personal network</li> <li>Foster career</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No premeetings, facilitate ideation and brainstorming in teams at the event</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage diversity and inclusion</li> <li>Foster the integration of diverse ideas and perspectives into the final product</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand one's personal network</li> <li>Learn</li> </ul>
Postwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pitching output to seek a home for the project to continue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase the visibility of projects to a larger audience</li> <li>Increase the chance of project continuation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster career</li> <li>Gain recognition</li> <li>Seek an opportunity for project continuation</li> </ul>

frustration among participants and reduced commitment if they feel they are forced to switch before their work is completed. Hence, this must be done carefully, with attention to participant goals, but can be effective if participants also want to focus on building their personal networks. If they are more focused on exploring their own ideas and polishing a prototype, efforts to impose fluidity among projects may prove quite unproductive. A collaborative-style hackathon would be suitable to reduce stovepiping, facilitate collaborative learning, enhance personal networks, and advance a cause shared among participants.

In competitive-style hackathons, teams generally compete for prizes.<sup>6,14</sup> Prizes can vary greatly, with cash prizes and opportunities for continued development of winning ideas as perhaps the most common. The opportunities for further development can take the form of providing additional resources, freeing up participants' time to work on the project posthackathon, or simply the opportunity to pitch the idea to a top executive.<sup>6</sup> Experts are invited as judges, and winners are typically chosen based on predefined criteria such as appeal to market, creativity, originality, and completeness. Some hackathons also award projects that receive the highest number of votes from attendees or meet specific challenges posed by executives. The competitive pressure is likely to incentivize teams to put more effort in their projects, with an aim to generate more unique solutions and differentiate themselves from other competing teams. Hence, competitive elements could be used to facilitate product innovation. However, as competition tends to hinder communication between teams, competitive hackathons might not be appropriate

to enrich networking among participants beyond participating teams. In large hackathons, with relatively few teams able to win prizes, many or most teams may consider themselves unlikely to win and may either feel demotivated or participate for other reasons and essentially ignore the competition, which was reflected in our interviews with many participants of competitive hackathons. To help the teams less interested in and motivated by competition to participate and benefit in other ways from the hackathon, it may be best to de-emphasize the prizes and not focus on them as the sole or even primary reason to participate.

#### **Attracting a Mixture of Attendee Skills**

It is crucial to garner interest by potential participants for the hackathon to be successful. This requires promotional material and the identification of individuals within the company who are enthusiastic about participating in and are willing to spread the news about the hackathon.<sup>13</sup> The promotional material should be distributed through suitable channels depending on the company culture. Examples of channels include posters, email, and enterprise social networks or Slack. This material should not only make clear that the hackathon has management support but also encourage potential participants to create ideas, form teams, and prepare individually or as a group prior to the event.

To attract attendees with relevant skill sets, hackathons employ various approaches including participation incentives, targeted invitation, and actual participant selection by organizers. Some hackathons with targeted invitations recruit attendees from distinct communities and invite

individuals that they want to be in the hackathon personally, while others encourage newcomers and minorities like women software developers with offers of additional training.<sup>11</sup> We have observed hackathons where organizers select participants using software tools such as Entrofy ([github.com/dhuppenkothen/entrofy](https://github.com/dhuppenkothen/entrofy)) to diversify participants over a range of criteria.

A hackathon consisting of attendees with diverse skills can facilitate innovation and learning due to attendees being able to generate and assess ideas from various perspectives. During our observations of multiple hackathons, we found that participants frequently got involved in conversations that happened among other team members. These situations led to providing useful suggestions that were based on participants' expertise and experience. In this regard, having diverse participants can facilitate spontaneous learning and creativity among participants. Skill diversity, however, can reduce productivity and technical output since it may take more time for attendees to be on the same page during the discussion and execution of a hackathon project, as evident in our observation of Microsoft's OneWeek Hackathon. Skill diversity presents a potential tradeoff between the generation of innovative ideas (high diversity) and technical progress (low diversity).

#### **Selection of Projects and Team Formation**

Hackathons can allow participants to 1) come up with their own ideas or 2) pick from a set of ideas provided by the organizers. In the first approach, participants propose project ideas at the beginning of or prior to the event<sup>6</sup> and recruit team members. This can be supported through a web-based

platform where people post project ideas and advertise roles required for their projects. This first approach is likely to encourage new and innovative products since the participants are free to inject, discuss, and combine their own ideas. Encouraging participants to propose ideas before the event has the advantage that teams can be more prepared, hence more efficient at the hackathon. In fact, in the competitive events we have observed, the winning teams always have fairly extensive preparation.

However, organizers always have to anticipate that some participants will come to the hackathon without a team and will need to pitch ideas and form teams at the event. Discouraging preparation, on the other hand, provides more opportunity to discuss and refine ideas with a larger

the possibility that high-priority work will be neglected.

Another important aspect is how to organize teams to have a desired mix of skills for each project. One possibility is to have a moderator assign participants to teams once their skills have been identified. Another, and more common, approach, is to allow teams to self-organize, running the risk that teams may end up with members with very similar backgrounds. In fact, homophily, the well-established tendency of people with similar traits to hang out together, tends to happen when there is no other basis for organizing teams, as we have observed in hackathons attended by distinct professional groups. Software tools that allow participants to pitch project ideas and a mix of skills required for the

A hackathon we have studied holds a separate event only with minorities before they take part in a larger event with more diverse participants. We have also observed hackathons where novices are encouraged to spread themselves out among teams with more experienced members, who are encouraged to help bring the novices up to speed. Keeping a manageable ratio of (at least 3:1) novices to experienced team members facilitates learning without too great a sacrifice of technical progress.

#### Prework and Postwork

It is advisable for teams that aim to develop a fully functioning prototype during the hackathon to meet before the event and divide their project into manageable work packages, assign responsibilities, and pretest technologies that they are going to use. This allows them to be as efficient as possible during the hackathon. For teams that are not prepared to start with idea at the event, it is worthwhile to consider the best ways to facilitate ideation and brainstorming in teams.<sup>4</sup>

For hackathon prototypes to have impact, follow-up activities have to be prepared by both organizers and participants. Organizers should provide opportunities for teams to promote their prototypes to a larger audience.<sup>6</sup> At Microsoft's OneWeek Hackathon, the organizers provided support for creating a video demonstrating each project and allowed participants to publicize their project and video through a web-based platform and a "science fair" at the end of the hackathon.

We found that the continuation of a project beyond the hackathon mainly depends on a market need and a project's fit to the existing products. Finding a suitable home

A hackathon consisting of attendees with diverse skills can facilitate innovation and learning.

set of people,<sup>4</sup> and it encourages participants to meet people who they might not have a chance to meet otherwise and, hence, enrich one's personal network. The second approach can be effective when a primary goal is learning,<sup>5</sup> and the organizers can devise projects that address specific learning goals.<sup>9</sup> It can also be very useful if the organizers' primary goal is to accomplish specific, high-priority work. A key tradeoff here is the creativity and fun that developing and working on one's own idea provides versus the difficulty that novices, in particular, may have in formulating a feasible project and

proposed project can foster skill diversity in self-organized teams. This can also allow someone to identify opportunities to sign on for roles in teams that will allow them to develop new skills.

When teams are organized to have a mix of skills, they will most likely consist of both novices and experts. Here, mentoring and tutorial sessions will be helpful for novices. We found brainstorming to be a useful technique that allows everyone to feel their ideas are heard and seems particularly effective in helping those who identify as minorities to feel satisfied with the process.<sup>4,11</sup>



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where a prototype can mature can be difficult and generally requires individual networking and determination on the part of the participants. If a hackathon is aimed to become a recurring event, organizers might also want to evaluate them to improve future hackathons. This could be done by postevent surveys, ethnographic observations, and interviews.

**H**ackathons are successfully used as a new form of organizing product innovation in response to new business needs and technical changes due to its ability to create prototypes and assess their feasibility within a relatively short period of time. However, designing a hackathon involves a careful upfront planning and consideration of goals that both organizers and participants have set for the event and for themselves.

Based on our studies of hackathons held by different communities as well as our review of extant literature, we have identified various goals that organizers and participants may aim to achieve from hackathons, showed how such events can be designed to achieve specific goals, and identified potential design tradeoffs. Our results suggest that, in addition to product innovation, hackathons can be used with great success as a tool for achieving a variety of goals such as enriched intracompany network and preparing employees for future changes and positions. 🌀

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