INTRODUCTION

Info Support increasingly organizes hackathons. We see them as a great way to initiate or work on innovation, experiment, challenge and motivate employees, attract talented developers, fix customer issues and of course: to have fun and learn.

And with learning being such a central aspect of hackathons, we aimed to create a playbook for hackathons so that organizers can learn from existing guidelines, experiences from past hackathons and pro tips.

We based the playbook on the experience of a bunch of hipster employees who have organized and hosted successful hackathons before it was cool. By updating it regularly with fresh input from our awesome hackathons, we aim to inspire more hackathons and help organizers create even greater hackathons.
WHAT AND WHY

A hackathon is also known as a hackfest or hack day. But what exactly is it, you ask?

A hackathon is a gathering where programmers collaboratively code in an extreme manner over a short period of time. Hackathons are at least one or a few days, but are generally no longer than a week. The aim is often to dive into and/or solve a particular problem, learning about new technologies along the way. While working on a particular project, the idea is for each developer to have the creative freedom to experiment with new ideas and solutions in a short amount of time.

But why would you want to organize one? While hackathons have become popular in a short amount of time, it maybe isn’t for you.

In our view, there are at least three things that characterize a hackathon: **Timebox, Creativity and Learning**.

Already know how to best achieve your goal? Is creativity not absolutely necessary? Don’t call it a hackathon. Don’t get us wrong: you may have a very valuable idea. A hackathon just might not be the way to go.
Hackathons are like pressure cookers. In a small amount of time, you have a goal to achieve. Hacking for a week or longer? Don’t call it a hackathon. It smells like regular work. And don’t expect to have actually solved a problem by the end of a hackathon. Real life problems are hard, and hackathons are often just a start.

Within the timebox of a hackathon, participants should be able to come up with creative ideas and solutions. Therefore, the goal of a hackathon shouldn’t be too confined.

A hackathon is meant to learn. Whether your hackathon is technology oriented or has the aim of solving a particular customer issue, learning must be at the center of your hackathon. Participants should have to explore (new) ways to achieve the goal.
One of the secrets of running a great hackathon lies in great preparation. By arranging as much as possible before hand, you’ll have more chance of it running smoothly and having a minimum of unwelcome distractions along the way. Below, we’ve summed up some basics to think about while preparing:

- What is my goal? If people are going to give up time for your hackathon, your goal will need to be compelling. Also, your goal is the starting point for many decisions you’ll need to make.

- What is my scope? To have a shot at accomplishing your goal, while maintaining a small timebox, you’ll need to scope your hackathon.

- Can I or do I need to involve a customer? If so: what do I need to agree on? Think about the financial aspect, a common goal, the marketing tools you’ll be allowed to use and preferred locations.

- Who is sponsoring my hackathon? It helps to have a management sponsor that promotes the hackathon and helps overcome possible roadblocks. For larger hackathons it may also be useful to have a financial sponsor to enhance your budget. If that is the case, think about what you’ll be giving them in return.

- What attendees am I targeting? Make sure to map who you want to be attending and hacking. This will differ depending on your goal, so be sure to align both.

- How many participants can I welcome? And how many do you need to have a shot at realizing your goal?

- Do participants need to come prepared? If so; how are you going to make sure everyone has the right knowledge, skills and/or materials from the get go?

- What venue fits my needs? The earlier you can reserve a location, the better. Again: align with your goal and target audience.

- Does my hackathon require a code of conduct for it to be successful and is it needed to let my target audience know in advance?

- Do I want to add a competitive element to the hackathon? If so, do I need a jury and/or prizes? Think about it, but don’t see this as a must. In fact, our experience shows that competition may not always foster the creativity, fun and learning that makes for a great hackathon.

- Would it help participants to have a shared document space at the ready? If your answer is yes, try to arrange this in advance.

Above all though: do everything you can to get positive energy. Hackathons can be used for different goals, but it should always strengthen the community, have people learn and make progress towards your goal. A hackathon without proper preparation or with unrealistic expectations will not accomplish this and will probably lack the positive energy you’re after.
Choose the date of your event carefully. Avoid the summer, national holidays or other major events like important IT conferences.

Hacking outside of the regular office hours is often not an issue, but align this with your target audience carefully. Weekends could be hard for certain participants, while weekday evenings could be tricky for others. Whatever your target audience though: try to arrange Info Support to cover some of the hours if you ask participants to give up their own time. This does not have to cover all hours, but our experience is that it will be appreciated even as a small gesture.
A hackathon needs an inspirational venue, away from the regular context of participants. This stimulates creativity. The earlier you reserve a location, the better. This can be hard though, as there are different factors that determine what venue fits your needs:

**How to get there**
Make sure your venue is not too difficult to reach, preferably also by public transport. Again: align with your participants.

**Seating**
Does the venue offer enough space and flexibility in terms of different possible seating layouts?

**Infrastructure**
Working with specific hardware or company provided laptops? Check if your venue is capable of running everything you need and have it installed in advance.

**Sound**
A bigger hackathon with more participants? Consider if you need a microphone and related facilities.

**Accessibility**
Many venues claim to be accessible, but could still cause unwanted issues for some participants. Consider how accessible your venue really is, on things like wheelchair accessibility, 24-7 access, unimpeded walkthroughs, etc.

**WiFi**
WiFi is a must. Check for accessibility, speed, security and if it’s ready for your amount of participants. Have backup if you think it may break.

**Power**
Check if there is sufficient power supply. As a guideline, check for at least 1,5 access points per participant.

**Sanitary**
Speaking of basics...Ensure adequate availability of bathrooms at your venue. And if you want to be proper, check for accessibility and hygiene.

**Facilities**
Does the venue supply the basics? A whiteboard? TV? Markers, stickies and tape?

**Support rooms**
Ensure your venue offers break-out rooms for extra’s you’ve got planned or other necessities. A speakers lounge or a quiet room for example. Also: got an afterparty planned? Check if your venue offers the facilities or if there are options nearby.

Whatever the venue you decide to go with, just keep in mind that your venue needs to breathe the vibe you want to create. This starts upon arrival and goes into every little detail. Check, check and check again if you are happy with the impression of the venue and if there are no factors that degrade the experience of the hackathon.
FOOD & DRINKS

Even hackers need food. Ensure that there is plenty of food for the taking during the day. The first important question here is: does the venue offer catering or do I need to arrange it myself?

Whatever the answer, don’t go too big. Your hacking-family does not need a christmas diner whilst coding. Make sure there is coffee, water and that the fridges are filled with enough drinks and snacks to grab. Having a customer onboard could change things though: this often legitimates a more formal break away from the hacking, sometimes combined with a demo or anything similar.

“EVEN HACKERS NEED FOOD!”

Experience learns it is best to arrange the necessary moments to eat (together) and be flexible on everything else. Want a moment away from hacking for bonding or learning with the entire group of participants? A lunch combined with a workshop or other session could be your answer here.

Also: Think like a parent. Pizzas are nice, but be sure to supply healthy alternatives.
Speaking of offering alternatives: dietary restrictions. Trust us: it’s a thing. Vegetarian options are a must if you have not mapped dietary requests of participants. Pro tip: ask in advance. If food is served buffet-style, try to give people with dietary requests access first or have it served separately to prevent contamination or all of it being consumed by others.

If you really can’t cater for those with special requests, let them know in advance and offer cheap and easily accessible alternatives.

And finally, be careful on alcohol. Even if you insist on having an afterparty or after-drinks, consider the impact of alcohol on the experience of the hackathon. Keep in mind that by supplying it, you may exclude others who do not drink for various reasons. Added to this is that most participants will feel it is still work related, so you won’t want to stimulate drunk participants, loud music or anything that prohibits participants from meeting interesting people, networking or having inspirational conversations about cool stuff.

Instead, you want your participants to leave inspired and with a satisfied feeling that lasts for days to come. So, our tip: avoid alcohol or consider restricting access with tokens.
One of the most challenging aspects of running a hackathon is getting the right group or participants. An important first step is setting a goal and identifying your target audience. Is your hackathon primarily aimed at learning or recruiting? Having students or young professionals participate could be great. Want to dive into a customer solution and need specific knowledge beforehand? You’ll probably need other participants.

In almost every scenario though, a mixed team seems to work well. Having only participants who will learn a lot at your hackathon will limit the results. Having only participants who know everything will limit the challenge and amount of learning the hackathon provides. A mixed team is the answer in many cases and often provides a great vibe between participants.

Challenge: first timers. For participants who are new to hackathons it can sometimes be difficult to use their talent productively in the group. It is the job of the facilitator or host to actively involve them in work items, to guide them if necessary and to keep their relative lack of hacking experience in mind when you do decide to work in couples. Be sure to keep everyone onboard, committed and productive towards the goal. Having too many participants for your hackathon can make your job as a host seriously hard on the above mentioned, so pay extra attention to the number of necessary participants while preparing.

TIP! To enhance learning and exchange of knowledge between participants of different knowledge levels, you could have them hack in couples. This will also stimulate everyone to keep working and will prevent people to become isolated and fall behind on productivity.
GUIDANCE

FACILITATOR
To guide the process of the hackathon and facilitate the sessions during the kickoff and wrap-up it is good to have a facilitator that is present the whole hackathon. This facilitator should have the knowledge and abilities to help teams with the workshops and coach the participants on team behavior so the team can achieve the best possible result in the given time.

SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT
When the participants have little to no knowledge of the business domain, make sure that there is a subject matter expert present during the hackathon. Preferably the whole hackathon or otherwise during planned slots.

TECHNOLOGY EXPERT
When you want to use or learn a new technology it is advised to either have a least one participant with advanced knowledge or a technology expert available. Preferably the whole hackathon or otherwise during planned slots.
Creating exposure for your hackathon is important for many aspects. It is important that you get the right people to the hackathon. Furthermore, promotion can be used to share the lessons learned and promote internally and externally that your company is working on innovative problems with innovative technologies.

The promotion starts well before the hackathon itself and continues for a while afterwards. During every phase it is important to align your messages to the goal of the hackathon, the target audience and ultimately the vibe of your hackathon.

I. BEFORE

- Determine your target audience and align communication accordingly
- Get your hashtags out: decide early and be consistent
- Start your communication well before the hackathon
- Promote your hackathon in user groups and meet-ups
- Cultivate the hackathon with influencers in the community if you want to go big
- Use Eventbrite or other similar services
Regularly tease participants and keep them committed running up to the hackathon. This means finding a balance between starting early and boring people with too many teases.

Make a gameplan how you’ll share results afterwards. Planning this early makes it easier to collect the right content during your hackathon.

Day before: one last reminder to your attendees with practical information and what they’re asked to bring with them.

II. DURING

Social media is key: it is a relatively easy way for everyone to create exposure during the hackathon, without it costing too much time or energy away from the hacking.

Lights, camera, action. If needed in your communication plan, arrange a marketer to shoot the right footage of your hackathon. Careful though: having someone around you who constantly has the lens pointed at you is not optimal. Choose a spokesperson if needed and decide what footage can be collected at what times.

Swag: Give participants a memorabilia at the end of the hackathon, even if it’s simple or small.
III. AFTERWARDS

- Create a cool aftermovie to share the vibe and content of your hackathon in a fun way
- Write blogposts about lessons learned
- Work on a customer case if a customer was involved and make the results and use of your hackathon explicit
- Redeliver your insights during knowledge sessions
- Use social media in the follow-up
- Use Slack or similar channels to have low-key communication

TIP!

Do it in couples! That will make it easier and less time-consuming
The sessions you’ll want to host differ according to the length of your hackathon. However, the very least every hackathon should have is a kickoff and an evaluation. It can be wise to have these hosted by a facilitator, so that you and the participants can focus solely on the hacking.

I. Kickoff
A good hackathon starts with a kickoff. During this, you’ll want to:

- **Introduce the organizers if necessary**
- **Have participants get to know each other.**
  - Some methods:
    - Speed-dates
    - Two truths and a lie
- **Explain the purpose of the event and set a clear goal**
  - If you organize the hackathon with or for a customer and have them onboard, be sure to do this together
- **Determine everyone’s learning goals**
  - What does every individual want to get out of the hackathon?
- **Mention the code of conduct if you have one and think it’s necessary**
- Explain the logistics and schedule of workshops, lunch, etc.
- Stimulate participants to share the event on social media.
- Get a backlog to start off with. Some methods:
  - Story Mapping
  - Event Storming

II. During the hackathon
After the kickoff it is wise to have a standup or mini demo each hour or two. Participants can demo what they’ve build, share what they will be working on next and let others know if they need help on certain items. If you run your hackathon with a customer, make sure they attend these standups or demos regularly so that their feedback can be absorbed by the team as often as possible.

If your hackathon runs for multiple days, it could be wise to plan slightly more time for a kickoff at the start of each day.

Pro tip: have someone manage the hacking regularly. Go around and check if everything is running smoothly, if everyone has enough work items, if people are working together and if everyone is enjoying the hackathon. Also keep participants alert on the schedule, signal when it’s almost time for lunch, workshops, sessions or other sessions and if necessary leading to a session: make sure everyone is prepared to share what they did.
The same goes for the sessions themselves: have them run within the scheduled amount of time, have everyone involved and make sure everyone understands and keeps on track.

**And last but not least:** work hard, play hard. In the relatively short timebox of a hackathon, working hard is part of the deal. It is advised however to build in distractions, by having for example foosball, table tennis or a game console available for the team to relax.

### III. Wrap-up

**Demo**

A demo at the end of the day enables everyone to see and hear what everyone else has done during the day. Have every team present their results to the others or, if you have a smaller group, have individuals share what they’ve done and learned. Keep things quick though; everyone may have a lot to share, but people may also be tired at this stage. If a customer is onboard, involve them in the demo and pay more explicit attention to the business relevance of findings and results.

**Evaluation**

Don’t forget to thank participants for their time, effort and energy. Ask them what went well and what could have been organized differently. This can be useful for future hackathons. A few options to do this are:

- Feedback wall: ask participants to leave their feedback before leaving
- Round-up: in smaller groups it can be useful to ask everyone to present their feedback
FOLLOW-UP

Running a hackathon isn’t done when participants have left. Take a few more steps:

- Clean up your venue, remove signs or promotion materials and check for lost items.

- Sometimes there are still work-items or to-do’s left at the end of your hackathon. Don’t underestimate this. A hackathon is often a great start, but rarely offers enough time to do everything you’d like to.

- Ask participants for feedback if you haven’t already done so during the wrap-up.

- Think about everything that went well and share your lessons learned for future hackathons.

- Also think about everything that could have been better, and share these lessons as well.

- Blog and speak about the event! Inspire people, share and redeliver your insights and stimulate others to organize more gold standard hackathons like the one you just ran.