5 Steps to Run a Successful Hackathon

agorize

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Introduction

A hackathon is a competition that encourages participants to put forward their most relevant and innovative solutions for a dedicated problem statement, often organized by businesses. Originally created for developers, they are now open to all types of innovators including students, customers, startups, employees, and more.

Whereas hackathons used to often be offline, they've changed from 100% physical events to hybrid competitions that start online and finish at real-life events. This is also known as O2O (Online to Offline) hackathons.

The benefit of O2O hackathons over the traditional 48-hour marathon event is that they're suited to all business sectors, industries and issues. Absolutely anyone can participate. These are the things you need for a successful hackathon:

• Large number of relevant participants
• High participation rate
• Multidisciplinary & complementary teams
• Completed projects & concepts
• Knowledge exchange and discussions between participants and the organizers

Step 1:
Objectives &
Problem statement

Hosting a hackathon starts with defining the objective. Based on this, one or a number of problem statements are developed to ensure the submitted ideas and solutions will add value to the organization. Launching a hackathon without a clear goal & method of delivering the hackathon's goal can lead to disappointment for both the organizers and the participants.

The aim

There are four main questions you and your team should answer to identify the hackathon objectives:
• What are the three key tasks for my team/department?
• What are the main drivers that will help us to succeed in these tasks?
• What are the main obstacles?
• What valid approaches have I not yet explored to achieve these tasks?

Also, base your answers on the four main goals that hackathons can help you achieve:

1. **Expand approach to innovation**
2. **Innovate on recruitment methods**
3. **Accelerate digital transformation**
4. **Launch engaging marketing and communication campaigns**

The problem statement

A problem statement is the topic that the participants will be focusing on. This is a crucial step as creating an appealing problem statement will capture the attention of the right people and increase the number of participants.

Step 2:
Target community

Choosing the relevant target community defines the success of your hackathon. Base who your audience will be on these three criteria:

1. Relevance: Your target audience should be relevant to your objective of increasing revenue. In other words, the participants should have the potential to come up with solutions that can help you increase your revenue.

2. Skills and Expertise: The participants should have the necessary skills and expertise to participate in the hackathon and to contribute towards developing solutions that are relevant to your business.

3. Demographics: The demographics of your target audience should be aligned with your business goals and objectives. For example, if you are looking to increase revenue in a specific region or market, you may want to target students and startups from that region or market.

The three most common indicators used to measure the success of a hackathon are:
• Number of participants from your target community
• Number of completed, usable ideas
• Impact and results on your core objectives

| Level of completion of deliverables / Your goal	High (turnkey solutions, proof of concept)	Medium (prototypes, applications, interfaces)	Limited (ideas, concepts, usage scenarios, sources of inspiration)	
Launch more engaging marketing and communication campaigns	Startups	Students Young graduates Developers IT profiles	Students Young graduates Employees	Developers IT profiles Customers Consumers
Expand your approach to innovation	Startups	Students Young graduates Developers IT profiles Employees	Students Young graduates Employees	Developers IT profiles Customers Consumers
Innovate in how you recruit		Students Young graduates Developers IT profiles	Students Young graduates Developers IT profiles	
Accelerate your digital transformation	Startups	Students Young graduates Developers IT profiles Employees	Students Young graduates Employees	Developers IT profiles Customers Consumers

Step 3:
Design the platform

Your platform is the tool you'll use to publish and manage your hackathon. We've summarized the essential and optional features of a platform (note that optional features aren't mandatory but will make your life much easier).

	Participant side	Organizer side
Essential features	• Register and easily create a profile • Submit your project online • Chat, video conferencing and commenting tools	• Program management • Access to all participants' profiles • Easy selection of submitted projects • Track the commitment of the participants with a leaderboard
Optional features (however very useful)	• Access to the team directory to find teammates • Mentoring by professionals • Sharing on social networks • Customize the participant environment	• Voting, liking or investing in a project • Integrate external voters • Advise participants on the platform • Follow the hackathon KPIs in real time • Customize the platform • Export profiles and projects

The Agorize platform is an example: it's easy to build teams (due to interface based on participant skills) and it provides space for online collaboration & external mentoring features. The online voting interface & dashboard also provides real-time hackathon statistics for organizers.
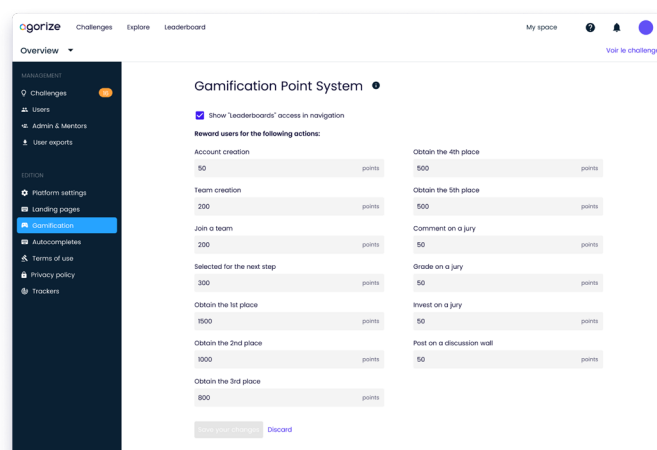
Step 4:
Timeline & Rules

Phases of the hackathon

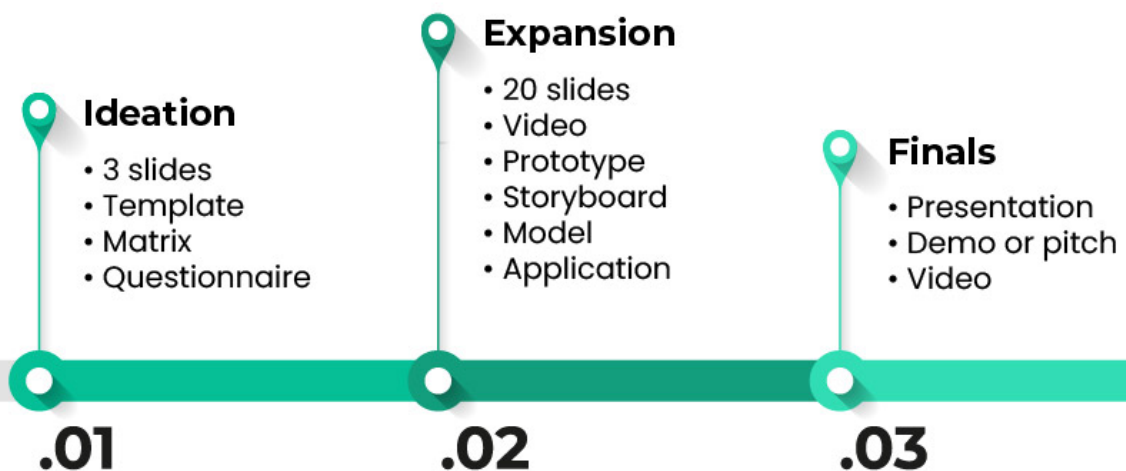Before setting out the official schedule, it's good to reference the main stages of a generalized hackathon.

Ways to participate in a hackathon

Participant profiles
While it's recommended to keep a hackathon as open as possible. In case you want to target a specific community, some filters can be applied to participant profiles For example: age, region, department, area of expertise, university/ college etc. However, the most successful hackathons welcome as many people to take part regardless of their background or skills.

Deliverables
Each stage requires you to decide what deliverables will be used to assess participants. The further the participants get in the competition, the more complex deliverables can be requested from them. Here are suggested deliverables for each stage.

Ideation
• 3 slides
• Template
• Matrix
• Questionnaire

Expansion
• 20 slides
• Video
• Prototype
• Storyboard
• Model
• Application

Finals
• Presentation
• Demo or pitch
• Video

.01   .02   .03

Intellectual property

Intellectual property (IP) is an important consideration for hackathons, as participants may develop new and innovative solutions that have potential commercial value. Make sure you clarify the terms and conditions of participation. Does your organization reserve exclusive rights to the deliverables, and for how long? It's important to define the rights of participants and your company to the projects submitted during the competition, and to communicate them clearly.

Mentors & Judges

Mentors
The role of a mentor at a hackathon is to provide guidance, support, and feedback to participants as they work on their projects. Mentors are typically experts in their field who have experience in areas such as business, technology, design, or entrepreneurship.

Judges
Having a good quality jury is crucial to ensure that the chosen projects are the most relevant to your organization. We recommend creating a mixed panel of internal and external jury members. Involving jury members from within your organization will help you to get them used to innovation while carrying out an in- house communication campaign. Simultaneously involving external jury members offers a new perspective and a different viewpoint on the submitted projects.

Internal jury	External jury
Management team members Employees	Customers Partners/service providers General public Experts/consultants

Selection criteria

Selection criteria are the core framework for the jury members to assess submitted ideas. Opting for hackathon platforms that have integrated grading features ease this process. These are some criteria that can be considered for the assessment of solutions.

• Originality

• Feasibility

• Budget

• Efficiency

• Relevance

• Sustainability

• Environmental impact

• Aspects Model

• Quality

• Pitch Quality

Each of these criteria should be weighted based on the importance you place on them. This will make the final score more accurate.

Step 5:
Write the brief

The hackathon brief is an important document that outlines the challenge or problem that participants will be addressing during the hackathon. Here are some key elements that should be included in a hackathon brief:

Introduction

Start by introducing the challenge or problem that the hackathon is addressing. Provide background information and context to help describe the scope and importance of the hackathon.

Problem statement

Clearly state the problem statement that participants will be addressing during the hackathon. The statement should be concise and specific, outlining the problem that needs to be solved or the opportunity that needs to be explored.

Goals and objectives

Describe the goals and objectives of the hackathon, including what you hope to achieve and how the solutions developed during the event will be used or implemented.

Limitations

Identify any constraints or limitations that participants will need to consider as they work on their solutions.This could be technical limitations or resource constraints.

Judging criteria

Clearly outline the judging criteria that will be used to evaluate the solutions developed during the hackathon.

Resources and support

Provide information on the resources and support that will be available. This may include access to data, tools, or experts guidance.

Schedule and logistics

Provide a detailed schedule and logistics information for the hackathon, including dates, times, locations, and any other relevant details.

Case study:
Huawei Spark Hackathon

Huawei has been working with Agorize on its innovator engagement for the last couple of years. What started as a strong local partnership, has grown into a global collaboration to engage and empower innovators. The results of their latest hackathon speak for themselves. Hundreds of innovative ideas by startups and early talent from top universities were crowdsourced and developed and the Huawei Spark programs have even received a Technology Excellence Award from Singapore Business Review.

Huawei Cloud offers cloud services that are used globally. With the help of Agorize, they wanted to educate early talent and strengthen their employer brand through the Huawei Cloud Spark Hackathon. To achieve this, three clear objectives were formulated:

Engage and educate early talent on how to use its cloud services to solve problems in health, banking, and sustainability.

Foster the use of GaussDB database service for MySQL.

Crowdsource innovative solutions leveraging cloud services and technology.

Agorize provided Huawei with the software, guidance and talent needed to make their hackathon a success. In this case, these five pillars were the foundation of Agorize's solution for Huawei:

1. Custom-built hackathon platform to promote the program
2. Crowdsourcing of early talent in Singapore from our community of innovative students and partner universities
3. Extensive back-end platform features to assess teams and proposals efficiently with different team members
4. Webinar and mentoring through the Agorize platform to help teams develop their solutions
5. Arranging the final pitch event to provide participants with a great closing event

Results:

450 participants made up 190 teams that participated in the Huawei Cloud Spark Hackathon. They pitched solutions in fields like health tech, sustainability and banking. Winners received over US$40,000 in prizes and job opportunities.

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Start-ups often struggle because of the shortage of developer talents. Huawei has a responsibility, as one of the largest tech companies in the world, to bridge this tech talent gap by providing opportunities to young aspiring entrepreneurs and developers. In our experience, exposure at an early stage benefits both students and startups. It connects startups to future hires, and students to potential mentors. It also helps kick start these young people's careers by helping build relationships between talent and companies. We have already seen the positive effects programs like the hackathon have on participants.

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Leo Jiang,
Chief Digital Officer at Huawei Cloud APAC

Conclusion

Preparing to organize a successful hackathon can be done efficiently when you follow these steps. Not only does it provide a pleasant experience for the participants, it increases the chances of your hackathon delivering serious ROI and getting internal stakeholders on board for future innovation programs.

A hackathon is a starting point to developing innovative solutions through collective intelligence. If it seems to be getting difficult being confined to merely internal resources, why not explore external ones? It's the best way to align with customer and market needs, engage talent and accelerate your transformation.

How Agorize can help

Agorize's software helps large organizations accelerate their hackathon and innovation process, from concept to full-scale implementation. Since 2011, Agorize customers have been transforming and creating value using the most comprehensive innovation management platform connected to a community of 5 million innovators and startups, supported by a team of experts.

If you want to organize a professional hackathon that engages a global ecosystem, reach out to see the Agorize platform for yourself.
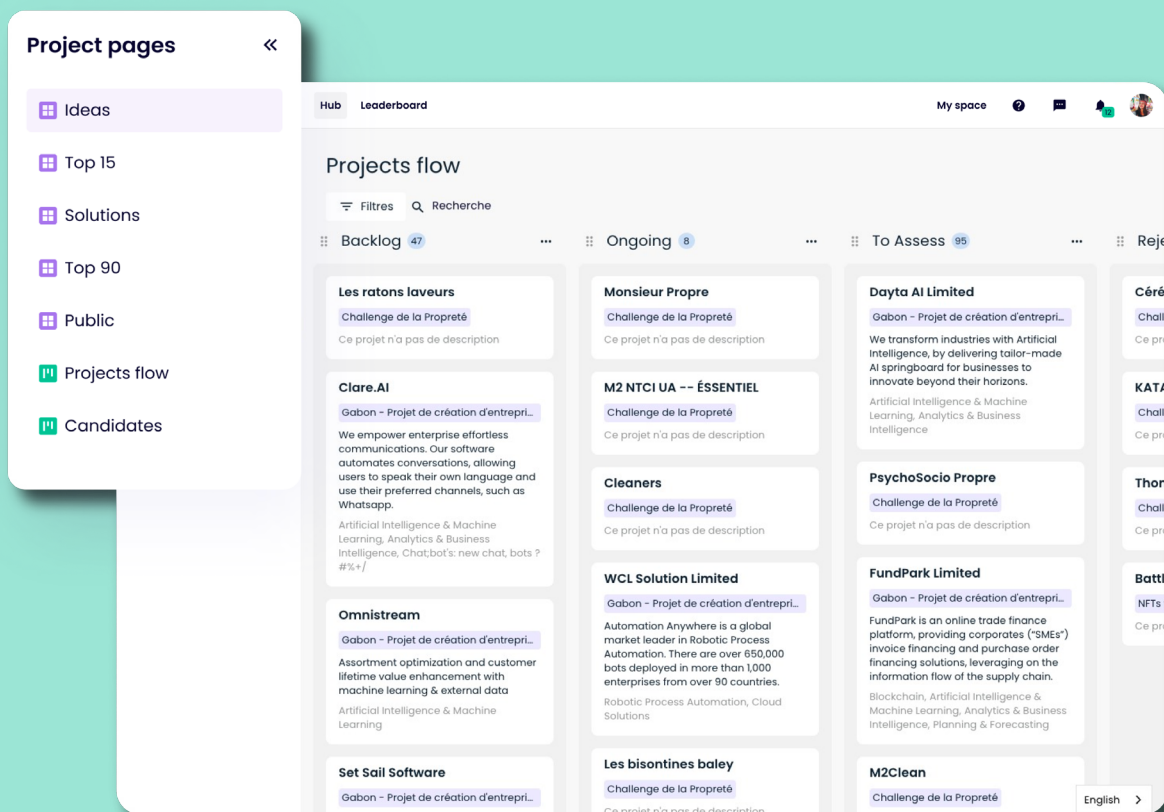
Bonus

Watch this video
with 3 more hackathon tips
by professors and Agorize experts.

Contact us

emma@agorize.com
https://get.agorize.com

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