

Organizational revolutions through idea hacking

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Businesses face the dilemma dividing resources between protecting the current value chain and developing new value propositions that in time replace the old ones. Not every organization has the luxury to have its own dedicated innovation unit and still then the ideas might not always be too innovative. Hackathons are an affordable and energizing way to generate innovative ideas that can revolutionize your organization.

Why should your company care about hackathons?

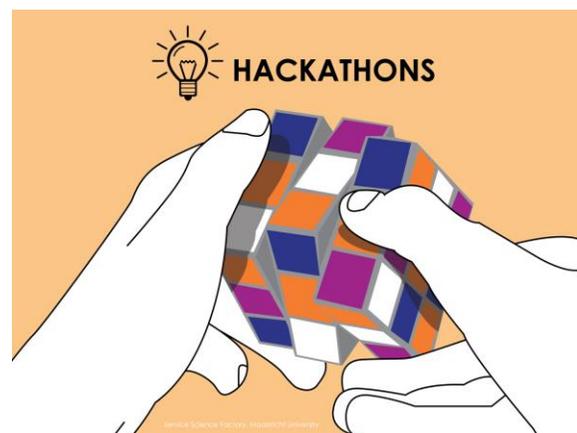
- Academic research shows that a multi-disciplinary approach to innovation is more effective.
- Organisations tend to develop a bias over time, which creates blind spots.
- Young, unbiased academic talent can spot unexplored opportunities.
- Students and professionals are eager to have a positive impact on business and society.
- Hackathons generate a lot of enthusiasm that can be used to accelerate innovation.
- Employees can become ambassadors of change and mobilize fellow employees.

“Are we capable of making rational strategic decisions without involving our emotionally biased intuition?”

Most of us business professionals tend to think of ourselves as rational human beings, capable of making unbiased business decisions that are based on facts, rather than emotions, intuition and personal experiences. Research has shown otherwise. The majority of our decisions are triggered by an intuitive emotion that we automatically rationalize afterwards. This often feels so natural and logical that we will only take off our biased perspective goggles when we are confronted with an alternative fact.

This pre-biased perspective is great for making quick decisions in already existing structures and processes, but tends to get in the way when we need to do things differently or have the ambition to innovate.

‘Hackathons’ are an effective open innovation approach to truly get an outside in perspective on your organization. The results are a wide pallet of alternative ideas and solutions that could broaden the perspective of your organization.



What are hackathons and where do they come from?

The term hackathon comes from the combination of the words ‘hacking’ and ‘marathon’ and finds its roots within the computer programming industry.

In the late 90s, the term was introduced by *Sun microsystems* (acquired by Oracle), and was used for an event where various (programming) experts came together and worked on a big technological challenge in a short structured programming sprint. These experts came from all over the world and brought in various specialties. Some of them were freelancers, others were professionals from competitive organisations. The idea was, that certain big (technological) challenges need a broader perspective and the best experts in the field; by facilitating these sprints radical innovation could flourish.

Through the years, the term hackathon has spread to other domains which resulted into business, societal and sector specific challenges which weren’t necessarily technological challenges.



How to setup a hackathon?

For every hackathon, it is crucial to find a well-balanced challenge that is both specific as well as generic. Being specific is important to ensure that you get results that are useful for further development, but being too specific also has the risk of inhibiting creativity.

Creativity and innovation thrive when different perspectives find a new common ground. It is important to find a way to form a diverse group of individuals that have a different background, age, gender and personality. Universities and other knowledge institutes could provide these fresh young minds. It can also be beneficial to include customers into these hackathons to get fresh solutions that already match the end-user’s needs.



The length of a hackathon can range from a couple of hours to a couple of days depending on the depth of the challenge, practicalities and the structure of the hackathon. The aim is to get new concrete concepts in a limited amount of time. It is important to set a timeframe that turns the event into a pressure cooker, without “over cooking” the participants. Besides the length of the hackathon, it is important to have some low paced intervals to let new insights sink in. Often the best ideas are created when the first rough ideas have been mentally digested.



Be aware that you are working with different types of participants. Some people might need more guidance than others. It is important to be clear on the instructions, and to give these instructions when they are relevant. Overloading the participants is counterproductive.

Also the location can play a big role in the output of the ideas. It can be inspiring to organize the event at the company itself so that participants can have a look inside the kitchen of your organization. Another option is to organize it within the city center so that participants can interview customers and receive direct feedback on their ideas from potential customers.

As a lot of the participants might be unfamiliar with hackathons it might be good to introduce certain tools to conduct research, filter insights, capture ideas and built prototypes. Fields such as service design can have a lot of practical tools that can be introduced during the hackathon when relevant.

HACKATHON CHECK-LIST Service Science Factory, Maastricht University



Inspirational challenge(s)



Multi-discipline/ perspective groups



Structured process with time frames



Various tools and material



Inspirational location

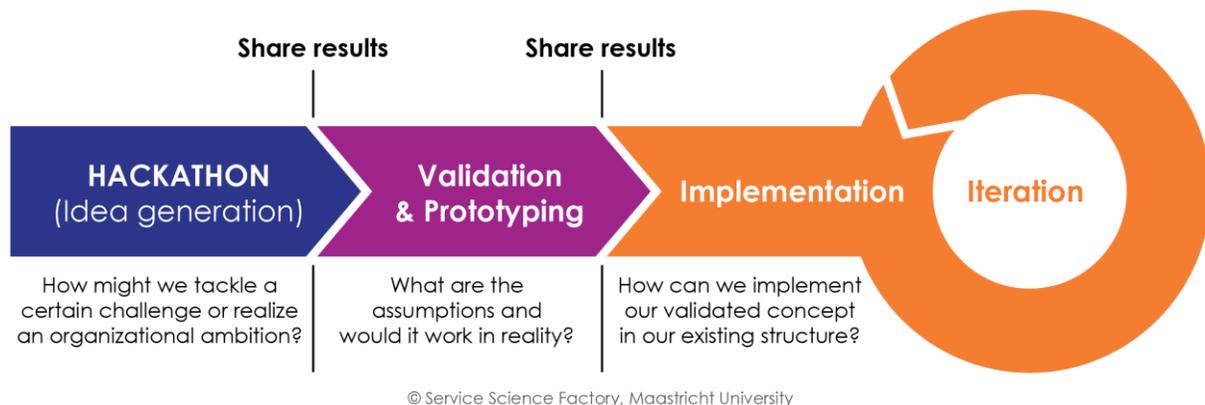
How to incorporate the ideas within your organization?

New innovative concepts often generate a lot of momentum in the form of enthusiasm when they are pitched in the end of the hackathon. A common mistake made by hackathon organizers is that they do not think of the continuation of the momentum generated in the hackathon. Too often we see that good ideas lose momentum rapidly, as the next day it is business as usual.

There are two tips that ensure the continuation of the momentum:

1. Free up resources and time for a follow-up project or a pilot
2. Incorporate your employees in the hackathon

When setting up a hackathon, it is important to paint the bigger picture and see where potential ideas could land within the organisation. Often, follow-up research or a pilot is needed to test the feasibility of the ideas or see how it can fit within the organization. Making this commitment beforehand by freeing up resources and employees will help to follow-up on the ideas after the hackathon.



The 'not invented here'-syndrome is a second reason why good ideas are not picked up. Outside ideas often generate scepticism, or don't fit internal structures. Identifying innovators within the organisation that can think outside the box, but also bring in the organisational perspective is a nice way to create a breeding ground for innovation. These employees can be the ambassadors of change, and should communicate the idea to fellow employees in a follow-up project once the hackathon has concluded.

Only by looking at the whole innovation chain and preparing for the various steps in the innovation process, are you able to create an organizational revolution. A good first start is to let experts and academics from outside your organizational structure hack challenges and opportunities that your organization faces today, and will face in the future.



What can the Service Science Factory do for you?

At the Service Science Factory, we have experience with organizing hackathons in many forms for many companies in different sectors ranging from three hour workshops to three day events. We are able to facilitate custom made hackathons that fit the needs of your organization.

What makes us unique, is that we have the opportunity to include students and academics from the various faculties of Maastricht University in these hackathons. By doing so, we include the necessary young minds and relevant academic expertise to work on your organizational challenges.

Contact us to know more:



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Biography:

Damien Nunes has an engineering and design background and developed himself further in the field of service and business innovation with a strong focus on user-centered innovation. As a project leader and service designer within the Service Science Factory he has the expertise to facilitate innovation projects and workshops that lead to a concrete outcome in a short amount of time.



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Biography:

Laszlo Determann has a background in, and passion for hospitality. In both events and projects, his focus is on creating the right setting to stimulate knowledge exchange and co-creation.

As project office at the Service Science Factory, he is the person that supports both people and processes, and often makes conceptual ideas applicable for practice.