

# Execute a Hackathon to Solve L&D Challenges

John Parsell



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Preparation.....	2
Designing a Successful Hackathon.....	2
Running the Event .....	8
Follow-Up.....	10
Conclusion .....	10
References & Resources .....	11

### JOB AIDS

Hackathon Kickoff Agenda .....	12
Scorecard Template.....	13
Communication Checklist.....	14

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**O**ur organization was facing imminent change. Year-end projections required accelerated timeframes for onboarding new employees and upskilling existing ones to support growth. I wanted a new and energizing way to generate solutions to those problems. And I wanted to capture the same energy, diversity of thought, and innovation that are required to solve urgent high-stakes challenges in a positive and low-cost-of-failure environment.

The solution: a talent development hackathon. In a hackathon, teams are challenged to develop solutions to a specific problem or to create a new process or product. Once they have brainstormed what they consider a winning idea, they develop a prototype. A panel of judges then reviews the solutions and chooses a winner, which ideally then moves forward into implementation. Organizations like Google and Facebook

use hackathons to engage employees and enable them to create and share new ideas with senior leaders.

In a 2016 Facebook livestream, CEO Mark Zuckerberg shared that “Some of the biggest things we’ve done like Chat, which turned into Messenger ... and things like Safety Check for helping people in the middle of disasters around the world were all started at hackathons.”

I was inspired by Alvin Chia’s *Hackathons Unboxed: A Field Guide to Ideating, Leading and Winning*. But I’m not the only one from outside the technology sector to use this type of event to address challenges. In a *Harvard Business Review* article, Elizabeth Spaulding and Greg Caimi write of how their management consultancy company Bain & Company “helped a leading financial services company hold a small hackathon with 18 employees. The company wanted to make its banking services more enticing to millennials. ... This exercise revealed an important insight: Millennials didn’t find switching banks onerous if they liked a bank’s products. Rather than devising ways to make switching banks easier, we realized the company needed to sharpen its product offerings. Armed with this information, the company developed prototypes for new tools that aim to help millennials avoid financial pitfalls and manage their money better.”

In this issue of *TD at Work*, I will:

- Provide the critical steps, guidance, and resources necessary to prepare and run a 24-hour talent development hackathon.
- Offer tips on how to capture the spirit, energy, and creativity of a hackathon for the event.
- Share how to create diverse teams that are equipped to create winning solutions you can bring to reality.
- Present case studies and examples of noncoding hackathons to demonstrate how others are successfully leveraging this platform.

## Preparation

In *Hackathons Unboxed*, Chia writes, “Contrary to popular belief, hackathons don’t simply happen—they require careful orchestration. We don’t create magic by tacking the hackathon label onto conventional ‘brainstorming’

sessions or ‘change management sessions.’” While brainstorming sessions usually focus on generating ideas, hackathons are focused on generating solutions to problems.

Designing an event to help you reach those solutions does not happen overnight. However, your time and effort come with many benefits beyond the solutions the hackathon teams develop. Before designing the hackathon, consider the project’s full range and scope and what you need to do ahead of it.

It takes about two months to organize a successful internal hackathon. That includes developing a communications effort, securing an executive sponsor, assembling a project team, and recruiting judges. (I discuss gaining buy-in and communication efforts later in this issue.) Factor those elements in when considering a hackathon for your talent development challenge. Further, when you first start planning, build in a time buffer for any unanticipated delays or snags.

Figure 1 breaks down the tasks and their associated timeframe for designing a successful 24-hour hackathon. Adjust the timelines and scale to meet your needs.

## Designing a Successful Hackathon

While hackathons can solve for an array of different challenges, they all have several commonalities. First, they begin with a clear goal. They are designed with a quality challenge—or challenges—for teams to solve. Teams are assembled with the right mix of participants to achieve the goal. Further, hackathons have a high level of energy, and the expectation is that the teams will innovate new ideas and interact with a spirit of friendly competition.

Joshua Tauberer, who created the “How to Run a Successful Hackathon” online guide, believes that “Participants should walk away having learned something new.” To help with that learning, secure a guest speaker for the kickoff session and educate participants on a topic relevant to your hack, such as brainstorming, design thinking, or human-centered design.

Author George Krasadakis explains that, depending on your goals, your hackathon’s output can be as concrete as a functional prototype or as simple as a concept plus wireframes or a pitch video.

## Set Goals

Your first step in designing a hackathon is to establish your goals. Start with the desired outcomes in mind. The goals affect and influence the makeup of your teams and judges panel; theme; branding; event size; types of solutions; and prizes, if any.

To get started, think about the challenges your employees or the broader organization are facing now or in the near future. Your organization may anticipate rapid growth, need to implement a new technology, or need to find ways to combat attrition. Leverage those challenges and craft them into goals.

*Example:* At the end of the hackathon, teams will present solutions to support the growth and scalability

of our organization by reimagining our customer service hiring and onboarding practices.

## Craft Quality Challenge Statements

Next, develop your challenge statements—that is, what problems will teams work to solve? If you are familiar with design thinking, you may recognize these statements as *How might we* questions. Indeed, they begin with the phrase “How might we ...” or “How can we ...” and include any criteria you’d like the team to work within or around.

Make your challenges broad enough to inspire teams yet narrow enough to focus their direction. Like a learning objective, write them in a way that makes it easy to assess whether the teams meet the criteria when they

Figure 1. Hackathon Timeline



Adapted from “Hackathons/Timeline,” MediaWiki