

Essential Hackathon Dos & Don'ts



Powering software competitions that drive innovation and awareness

Hackathons are becoming increasingly popular all around the world, with new ones sprouting up almost weekly. And why not? Done right, they can help foster meaningful connections, get developers involved and excited about your software, and even spark new business ideas. Done wrong, you risk damaging your credibility and reputation with precisely the group of people you want to welcome into your circle.

So we've put together a handy list of "Dos and Don'ts" for your next hackathon.

	DO	DON'T
Theme	Make it meaningful and relevant to solving real challenges or problems.	Make it too specific or too broad.
End-Product Expectations	Expect working prototypes.	Expect finished products.
Date	Have it on a weekend.	Have it during holidays or in conflict with other events.
Location	Make it accessible by public transportation or provide some mode of transportation (e.g., shuttle service). On location, make sure you have signs to direct people to the hackathon and important areas such as the restrooms.	Make it in the middle of nowhere.
Registration	Monitor throughout and stay organized.	Ignore it until last minute and scramble for details.
Marketing	Cast a wide net with a well thought-out plan.	Assume the masses will come.

	DO	DON'T
Internet	Make sure the network can handle capacity and WiFi is solid.	Rely on host or cheap equipment.
Audio/Video Equipment	Prepare (microphones, projectors, screens, etc.).	Forget about it. Or resort to yelling at the crowd.
Other Equipment	Have flipcharts, whiteboards and plenty of dry erase pens for teams to use. Also assume you need 1.5 power sockets for each attendee.	Rely on teams to bring everything they need.
Food/Snacks/Beverages	Keep people well-nourished, with enough variety throughout the day.	Have only pizza and energy drinks.
Staff	Have multiple people take shifts throughout the event.	Rely on a lone ranger.
Timing	Run it for 24 ~ 48 hours.	Make it longer or shorter.
Sponsors	Get them early, prior to launching event.	Launch, then pray for miracles.
Special Guests/Speakers/Judges	Promote and get them involved.	Rely ONLY on sponsors.

	DO	DON'T
Participation / Skills Mix	Make it clear if special skills are required for your hackathon. Remember that non-designers/programmers can also make great contributions to teams.	Assume the right people will come or that everyone needs to be a developer.
Matchmaking	Pair or group people, or least help facilitate connections.	Let people struggle on their own.
Coaching/Mentoring	Have topic experts on hand to assist and give feedback.	Have an agenda to sell your product or expect makers to have in-depth topic knowledge.
Demo	Limit to 3~5 min, tops.	Let people ramble endlessly.
Intellectual Property	Clearly communicate your position on licenses.	Pressure developers to surrender their rights or make it difficult to understand what it means to participate.
Judging	Be transparent, fair and clear.	Assume you need a winner.
Prizes	Make it less about the prize and more about the experience. Let everyone get something (e.g., t-shirts).	Make it all about the prize for only the winner.
Winners	Congratulate and acknowledge all participants.	Snub everyone but the winner.

	DO	DON'T
Celebrating	Set the stage for a relaxed celebration that's optional.	Force socialization from tired developers.
Story Telling	Promote winners and participants (blog, tweet, etc.) and take photos. Ideally, assign someone to do interviews and write blog posts during and after the event.	Go radio silent, assume that teams will blog themselves or that the facilitator will have time.
Post Event Coding	Encourage it.	Let projects die.

You know the saying: the devil is in the details, which is definitely the case for hackathons. Get organized, prepare, and then run through the event details again and again.

One very important DO (our legal guys wanted to make sure we mentioned this bit): be sure your organization is adequately insured for the event, venue and any other liability (lost or stolen goods at the event, injuries, etc.). While people aren't likely to be skateboarding or sword-fighting at hackathons, it's always better to be prepared for the worst.

And finally, don't think of a hackathon as an end-all, be-all. Hackathons are a great way to engage developers, but it shouldn't be your only effort; it's a step in the right direction and can be very fruitful if you think of them as part of a larger, longer-term strategy to grow and nourish your developer ecosystem.

Want more guidance on hosting a successful hackathon or brainstorming longer-term strategies? [Get in touch with us](#) — we're happy to help you get started!