How to Win the Hackathon

Hackathon

A Practical Guide for Teams

How to win the **Hackathon**?

You need a great ... **strategy**!

You definitely need a great idea, but you also need an even better strategy: rapidly execute, build a functional prototype and prepare an impressive pitch of your concept.

The following few slides will help you to:

- **Handle your ideas**

- **Setup the right team**

- **Get ready for rapid prototyping**

- **Get ready for presentation and pitch**

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Set the right **focus**

What is this **hackathon** really about?

The purpose of a hackathon is not always *that* clear. In many cases the objective — from the organizer's point of view- is to boost collaboration and team spirit; or to promote a particular technology; or to solve a difficult problem and generate novel ideas.

You need to read between the lines and **get the full context**: the timing, the theme and the recent history of hackathons can unveil the 'hidden objectives' and let you better define your strategy.

Also, the **type of the deliverable**, the **evaluation criteria**, the voting process and the synthesis of the panel of judges can help you figure out the priorities, design your communication strategy, set the focus areas and form the right messages to include in your presentation.

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Capture your **ideas**

Document your (great) idea(s) upfront

Write down your idea(s) before the start of the hackathon. Use a simple form, like **a short summary of your idea as an one-pager**, describing the problem you are about to solve, your innovative solution, your assumptions and the technologies involved.

This will prove to be very helpful for you and your team – to quickly set the context and **organize your workstreams**.

Also, define there the **target output** of your project (what will you try to build? a functional prototype, a concept + wireframes, a physical prototype, a predictive model?)
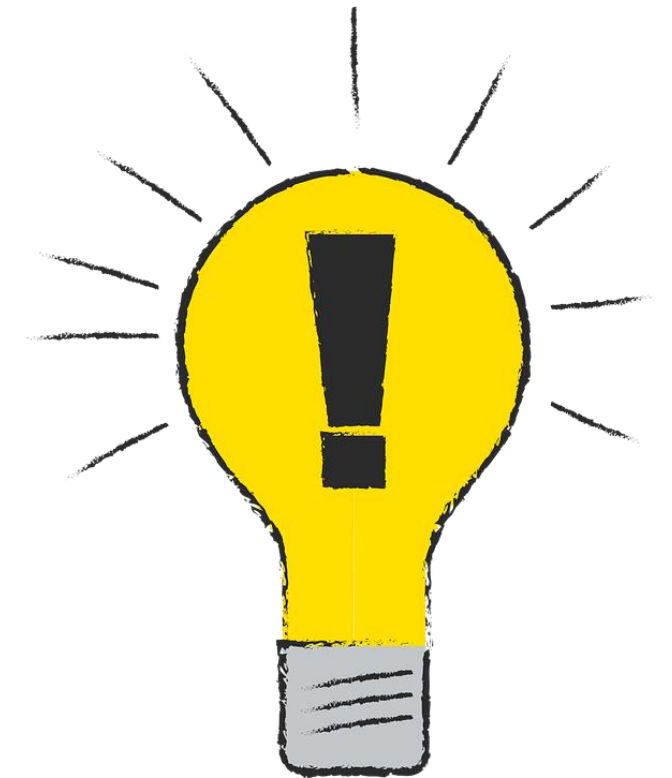
Is your idea really **novel**?

Reality check: do a proper web search

You might think that you have the 'killer idea' or that you have just discovered something really novel; but, in our online and interconnected world, the chances to come up with a unique, novel idea tend to zero.

You should **validate your concept** — do a quick web search to gather information on its uniqueness, feasibility and cost of a potential implementation.

Even if you find similar technologies and solutions already offered out there, you might still have (or be able to find) **differentiators** to help you compete with the current players; or you might find yourself 'killing' your idea and proceeding with an alternative one.

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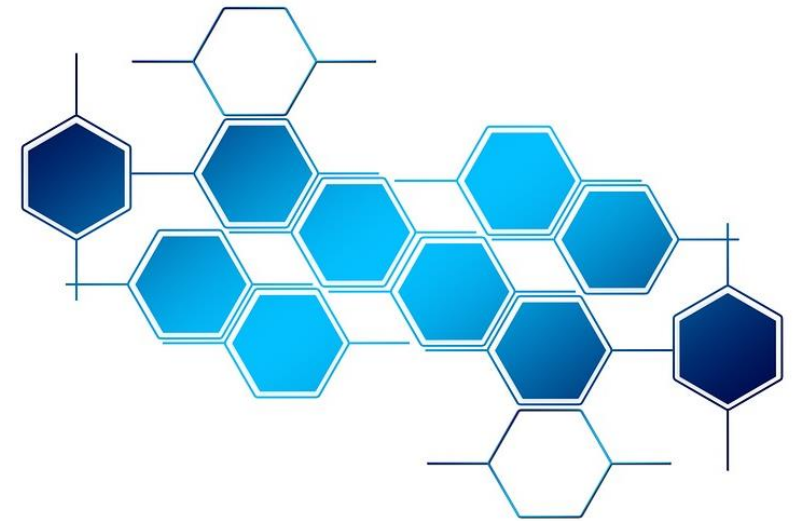
Do you have the **right team**?

You need **talent** + special characters!

Think and act as entrepreneur: make optimal use of the resources available and manage to impress your 'customers' and 'sell' you concept — all within an extremely short time frame.

Synthesize the right team: both the size of the team but also its diversity in terms of skills and characters can make a huge difference.

You do need **the right technical expertise**; you also need to execute rapidly, with quick decisions, fast iterations and agility. The characters in your team should be compatible with the fast pace of the hackathon: add the wrong characters in the mix and you will possibly end up with a nervous break-down after a couple of hours.

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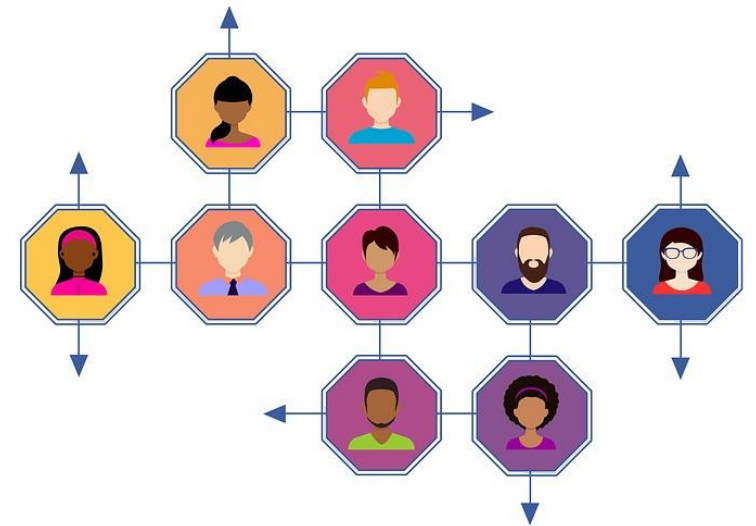
The team: focus on **mentality**

Less process; more **agility and speed**

Hackathons are extremely fast-paced and demanding so there is no space for formalities, processes and 'by-the-book' practices. It is about 'making the impossible happen in no time' and you need to form your team with this in mind.

You need a strong product leader with clear vision and awareness of the technological capabilities; you need technical experts with agile engineering mentality; you also need a member to start thinking from the very beginning on how to present the idea/ concept/ output of your efforts.

Ready for **rapid prototyping**?

Make assumptions; reuse; move fast

You need an impressive prototype fast. Normally there is the **core innovation** — the key components implementing your novel solution + '**secondary components**' ranging from data, models, user interfaces, APIs to support your core components — all need to be integrated into a single functional prototype for your demos and/or the final deliverable.

You need to prioritize in order to set the focus on the right items and thus maximize the value you can deliver in such a short time frame. Instead of wasting time and energy on '**secondary components**' (those needed for your prototype but conventional — needed only to support/frame your solution) you can hard-code them, mock data and consume existing API's wherever possible.

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Ready for **rapid prototyping**?

Focus on innovation; fake the 'boring' parts

Its OK to make assumptions as long as you are presenting them as part of your solution; normally it's OK to fake some parts of the overall solution as soon as you clarify that and you also present how you would normally build it.

At the same time, you need a clear product vision (what are you building and why) and what is the critical path to build it — dependencies, priorities, checkpoints.
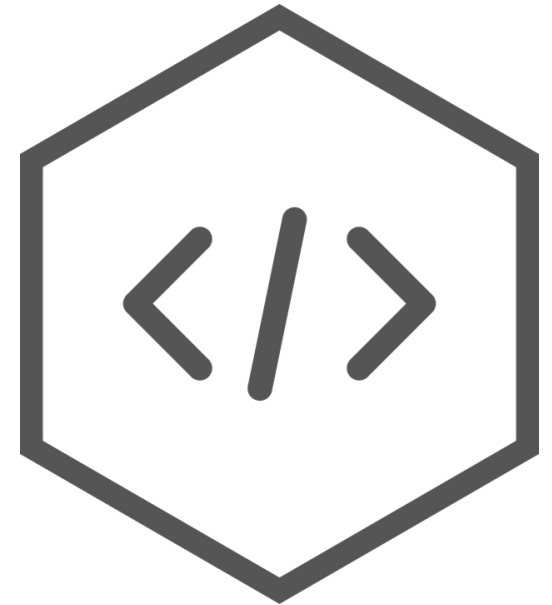
Ready to **pitch**?

A **great presentation** can make the difference!

Depending on the hackathon, you might be asked to deliver a video presentation along with your product design, wireframes, code, functional prototype; in some cases all of the above + a pitch to a panel of experts.

It is a great strategy to pick the right team members to start preparing for this from the very beginning: to properly package and best present your great concept and work.

The 'presentation readiness' is a critical – you need to start preparing from the very beginning - a parallel thread throughout the hackathon.

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Ready to **pitch**?

Prepare the **right message** for your audience

You need to understand your audience and the target panel; then you need to **define the right messages** and highlight the right aspects of your product/ solution.

Keep your pitch *simple, fast and effective*; use key-statistics to support your assumptions; summarize your competition, the state of the art and highlight how you are different.

include commercial and marketing aspects; demonstrate passion in building the real product; do rehearsals in pitching or presenting the concept; be creative, informal; add humour.

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