

Hackathon Starter Kit

Introduction	2
What is a Hackathon?	2
The Types of Hackathons You Can Organize	2
Phase 1 Initial Considerations	3
Decisions	3
Choose the Topic or Theme	3
Choose a Date	3
Choose a Technology	4
Define the Format	4
Teams or Individuals?	4
Choose Your Evaluation Criteria	5
Reserve a Venue	5
Define Your Schedule	5
Terms and Conditions	6
Get on the Web	6
Registration	7
Sponsors and Partners	7
Judges	7
Mentors	7
Prizes	8
Staff	8
Marketing Materials: Design, Design and Design	9
Phase 2 Promoting Your Event	10
General Promotion Activities	10
Social Media	10
Promoting to Schools, Colleges and Universities	11
Phase 3 Advance Preparation	12
One Month Before	12
Branding the Venue	12
Branding Your Merchandise	12
Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner	12

Staff Allocation	13
Mentor Allocation	13
Brief Your Host or Hosts	13
Licensing and Training	13
Surprises!	14
The Week Before	14
Close Registration and Send Reminder Emails	14
Final Orders	14
Printing	14
The Day Before	15
Phase 4 The Hackathon	16
Welcome the Participants	16
Kick-off Session	16
Time to Eat	16
Code Freeze	16
Qualifying Round	16
Final Pitch	17
Decision Time	17
Announcing the Winners	17
After-Party!	17
Phase 5 After the Hackathon	18
Follow-Up	18
Demonstrate Results	18
Use Your Survey Responses	18
Celebrate	18
The Final Word The OutSystems Pitch	19
Download Your Templates	19

Introduction

So, you want to host a hackathon. Or someone said, “Let’s have a hackathon,” and it’s up to you and your team to make it happen for your company. This guide can help you. Let’s go!

What is a Hackathon?

Perhaps you’re not sure what a hackathon is. The definition is the easy part. It’s a design event where just about anyone involved in software development—even subject matter experts—gather to work on software projects. They’re intense, sprint-like sessions that can last between a day and a week. They often have themes like programming languages, operating systems, APIs, industries and even programming demographics. And winning one is a rush.

Now that you know what a hackathon is, the next thing you probably want to know is which kind to organize.

The Types of Hackathons You Can Organize

You can create a hackathon with different purposes. The most common are:

- | **Recruitment:** Use this marathon to gather developers and observe them during the project.
- | **Introduce new technology in your company:** Showcase what’s cool and motivate your developers to learn something new, especially if you offer prize money or vacation days.
- | **Innovation labs:** Get your team to work together on disruptive ideas for current challenges or invite developers outside your company to bring fresh perspectives.
- | **Social awareness:** Gather great minds to solve society’s problems through creativity and by developing new solutions.
- | **Brand awareness:** Make yourself known. In the end, there might be a little of this in any of your hackathons.

Phase 1 | Initial Considerations

Depending on the scale of the event, you need from 3-10 weeks to properly prepare for the event. If your objective is to astonish the participants, it could take somewhere between 2-9 months.

Decisions

Creating a hackathon starts with making the decisions that will affect everything else. If you decide on a two-day hackathon, food and an overnight venue has to be part of the plan. If it's a one-day hackathon, the agenda will be different and the pitch for your app or solution should be after dinner.

Choose the Topic or Theme

As you consider your hackathon topic or theme, ask yourself the following questions:

- What would you like the hackathon to accomplish?
- What problem do you want to solve?
- What do you want participants to build?

If you have no idea, just pick a trending topic or an innovation you would like for your organization.

Next, announce the topic in advance so people have an idea of what they'll be doing. It's important not to say too much; otherwise, participants will show up with their work mostly done. An effective strategy is to offer a general topic and then give a more detailed briefing at the kick-off session on the day of the hackathon. That way, you'll be sure that it's fair for everyone.

Choose a Date

Weekends are when participants are most available, so your dates should probably fall on a Saturday or Sunday. Holiday weekends, however, are not a good bet, so check your calendar carefully, especially if it's an online hackathon and there will be participants from around the world.

Choose a Technology

Hackathons tend to focus on building an app or software using specific coding techniques, programming languages, operating systems, and development platforms. So, when you think about what you'd like participants to build, you should also consider the technology involved. It's not uncommon for a hackathons to use a specific technology (for example, R in data science) or for hackathon hosts and sponsors to provide that technology.

(If your goal is to keep your hackathon hours as short as possible and still have a working app at the end, consider OutSystems as your technology. We will even provide you with licenses for free if you let us know that it's for your hackathon.)

Define the Format

There are different hackathon formats: 24 hours or 30 hours; starting on Friday night or on Saturday morning and running for 48 hours; running it for a week remotely or on-site. Defining the format has everything to do with your goals and output. So, you need to settle on those first.

Is your hackathon going to be about developing an app? Or a new solution for a problem you have? Perhaps you're looking for an innovative approach to a common activity or process? Or maybe you have no idea and are just going to pick a hot topic?

The most common hackathon schedule is from Friday night to Sunday afternoon (a 48-hour format), but you can choose less or more. Starting on a Friday can be a problem because the initial brainstorm phase is fuzzy and people get tired quickly. If you start on a Saturday morning around 9 AM and finish by Sunday afternoon, you'll be sure your participants are engaged during the final presentations. The format is an important decision because it will help you choose the venue.

Teams or Individuals?

Another important decision is whether participants can enter as individuals and team up at the event or if the individuals enter as a team from the same company, organization or group of friends. If they enter as teams, you should have requirements that they fulfil such as how many team members, if there will be different roles on the teams and other considerations. If you're inviting individuals to team up at the hackathon, you should be prepared to have a team-building session.

Teams should have 3-5 participants because that number works best in a hackathon environment and people can take turns having breaks. Fewer than 3 creates a lot of work and pressure and more than 5 can create confusion.

If you want individuals to form teams, a good tactic is to hold a pre-event (maybe Friday night or one week before) where people can meet and decide who they want to team with. You can also use a communications channel (like Slack).

Choose Your Evaluation Criteria

When you announce the hackathon, include the evaluation criteria as part of the announcement or make sure you share it shortly thereafter. That way, participants know what they're fighting for and what counts toward their goal for winning. If you're not sure how to go about this, here's a [sample](#).

Reserve a Venue

Your venue is one of the first things you have to nail down after you've decided on your format. As you look for the right venue to book, here are some things to consider:

- | What is the wifi strength, reliability and availability?
- | Who will be the speakers for the final presentation?
- | Are there sufficient power outlets? Is there easy access to them?
- | Are the chairs comfortable?
- | Are the tables the right size?
- | Are restrooms located close to where participants will be working?
- | Is there a place to eat?
- | Are there places to rest?

Define Your Schedule

When you're promoting your hackathon, you should provide an agenda. Don't overthink this, because you can always change the timetable. In addition, preparing the agenda will help you define these important milestones:

- **Breakfast:** Glucose is the primary source of energy for every cell in the body and most participants will be hungry. You'll want to make sure their sugar levels are up when they kick off!
- **Start and Finish:** Participants need to know when to be there, when to travel, and they might want to book hotels

- **Welcome Session:** You can give them the briefing at that time or just say welcome and perhaps have a short presentation about your company. Remember: these people are eager to start; they will have a short attention span so don't spend much time on this.
- **Knowledge Sessions:** Quick talks on a specific topic can be helpful. However, some participants might not join in because these sessions cut into their development time, and their goal is to win.

An agenda usually has the following elements.

DAY 1	DAY 2
Doors Open and Breakfast	Breakfast
Welcome Session	Lunch
Kick Off	Submission Deadline
Lunch	Pitches, Demos or Both
Knowledge Sessions	Announcement of Winners
Dinner	Closing Session
Pitch Workshop	

If you're running a hackathon all night, make sure participants can come and go and have access to all facilities no matter the hour. This is critical for restrooms. Also keep an eye on the temperature: if it is too cold, your participants might have trouble concentrating. If it's too warm, they could fall asleep. Extreme temperatures either way could mean your participants leave before they finish.

Terms and Conditions

A document with terms and conditions is a must-have. It spells out the rules, defines who is responsible for what and provides the terms for the prize. This document also informs participants of the scope, process, evaluation criteria and team composition.

[Check out this sample.](#)

Get on the Web

You'll need to be on the web to advertise your hackathon and provide details about the event such as the location, the time, terms and conditions, and the agenda. A draft presentation is also helpful. You can build or set up a website yourself. Or, if that's beyond your capability or

you don't have time, you can use devpost.com. It has helpful tools for participants and for managing the event, and it can even take care of registration for you.

Registration

You'll need a registration form on the web that makes it easy to sign up. Think about the information you want participants to provide and make sure you don't ask for too much. The goal is a simple form that people can fill out quickly. You can also use [Eventbrite](https://eventbrite.com) or an equivalent service to handle registration.

A handy tip: After you have the URL and if you're doing most things yourself, you can use bit.ly or a similar provider to shorten the link so it's easy to share on social media. Not only that, but you can track who is clicking it and where they came from.

Sponsors and Partners

The more assistance you can get from outside your organization, the better. Partners lend credibility to your effort, can help you find participants and can even provide staff. And usually, all you have to do is incorporate their brand into your marketing assets.

Sponsors also lend credibility to your event. They can contribute anything from prizes to the venue for the hackathon, from merchandising to food. For example, a university sponsor could provide the venue, a pizzeria near the university could contribute food, and a printer tied to the university could take care of producing materials.

In return, you can offer them the opportunity to recruit, talk about their product in one of your knowledge sessions, and add their branding to your promotional materials. There is little trade-off on your part when you consider the benefits.

Judges

For your judge or panel of judges, you need to find people who inspire trust and really know the subject matter. For a development hackathon, look for people who know the types of apps or technology used to build them. If you're hosting an innovation lab to solve a business problem, you'll need someone who is knowledgeable about those challenges and can appraise the viability of ideas. For help approaching someone about judging your hackathon, you can find an email template [here](#).

Mentors

Mentors help your hackathon participants overcome obstacles, challenge ideas, find answers to specific questions and think. The general practice is for mentors to be a team of SMEs from

your own company. However, you can also look outside your company for experts on a specific topic or knowledgeable entrepreneurs, business professionals or marketing professionals who understand the specifics of the hackathon. They should know how to provide guidance and share their thoughts on what the participants are doing.

Prizes

There are all kinds of prizes given away at hackathons: money, the hottest new tech toys, etc. We recommend that you offer money, and the greater the amount, the better. However, it's best to check the tax laws in your area to make sure that participants won't get penalized too much for winning. If that's the case, you should consider something else.

Here are some other gift alternatives if you can't offer money:

- | Oculus Rift
- | Arduino kit
- | Sphero
- | Google Glass
- | Unreleased hardware
- | Rechargeable battery packs
- | Laptop or tablet
- | Drones
- | Parts or gift cards for Inventables, Sparkfun, or Adafruit
- | Free or discounted licenses for your product

Also, consider checking with your sponsors or partners to see if they can offer anything.

After you've decided on the prize, make sure that all communications that mention the prize are clear and that participants will get exactly what you advertise. For example, if you have decided that the prize is money, you should break down the value of the prizes. And make sure your grand prize is much more valuable so that it's clear that it is what they should be striving for. It adds incentive to the hackathon. For example, suppose your prize money totals \$1000. Consider offering \$600 as the grand prize, \$250 for second place, \$100 for third place and \$50 for fourth.

Staff

Here are some suggestions for how to staff your hackathon from your company:

- **"The Maestro"** - Main point of contact: This person will be the face of the event for participants and will welcome the judge or panel of judges when they arrive.
- **"Welcomer"** - Registration and check-in manager: At least one person who takes care of registration and participant selection.
- **"Venue jedi"** - Facilities managers: The people who make sure that food is always available and comes on time, removes the trash, checks restrooms, and more.
- **"Geek"** - IT manager: The person who makes sure the technical side is working.
- **"Beat reporter"** - Social media specialist: This digital journalist takes pictures, shares them on social media, live tweets, and sets up Facebook live videos. The beat reporters also interview participants, judges, and others.
- **"Press secretary"** - Communications liaison: This person takes care of any press covering the event.

Marketing Materials: Design, Design and Design

Here are some ideas for brand assets and giveaways:

- Website design (a content management system like [Wordpress](#) is a great way to build and design your webpage or pages easily and quickly. And updating the website is a breeze)
- Posters (check out these cool examples: [1](#), [2](#))
- Name tags
- Prizes, signs and backdrops (something [like this](#) is great for photos)
- T-shirts (these are cool [1](#), [2](#), [3](#))

These materials are an extension of your brand, so try for consistency.

Phase 2 | Promoting Your Event

Most hackathons, like any event, have a drop-off from number of registrations to actual attendees. Therefore, your goal is to overbook! Promotion is the most critical element in attracting registrations, and it is also key to the overall success of your hackathon.

You start by defining your target and figuring out how to reach them. Professionals are likely to respond to thought leaders in your industry or sector—in meetups, on social media, and at events. College students are likely to be enticed by a great party.

The next step is making sure you have a consistent tone that resonates with your targets by defining your communication style, along with the best way to tell participants why you're hosting the hackathon.

After you've made these important decisions, here's a [sample of a communication plan](#) you can use to build your timeline.

General Promotion Activities

Here are some ideas for attracting registration and participants:

- Create a challenge where the winner receives an access code to a video with tips on winning the competition.
- Develop a social media campaign that starts with teasers and then promotes the event all over Facebook Twitter, and LinkedIn once registration is live.
- Ask developer communities (such as the OutSystems Community) for help or if you can post about it in their forums.
- Meet with local media to arrange press coverage.
- Invite bloggers to promote and follow the event and give them access to judges or information.
- Post the Hackathon to your website or [DevPost](#).

Social Media

These social media ideas can also help:

- Pre-event promotion and online conversation monitoring during the event.
- Create a Facebook event page and Twitter account (or use your company's account, ideally one that's developer-centric).
- Ask other hackathons to tweet about you.
- Consider Facebook ads.
- Send out teasers about your event on Twitter and see if you can get well-connected individuals to spread the word as well.
- Tag and post about sponsors, prizes and any cool judges or personalities who will be there.
- Create and use an event hashtag.
- Encourage people to share on social during the event. (Feel free to tag @OutSystemsDev, use our hashtag: #OutSystems, and we will retweet you.)
- Create a blog post or article about your event and work with your PR team or agency to get local media to pick it up.
- Encourage partners, sponsors, judges and organizers to post about the event. Tag them on Twitter.
- Post information on various LinkedIn and Meetup groups.

Promoting to Schools, Colleges and Universities

Students are usually excited to participate in hackathons, so these are things you can do to reach that audience:

- Contact student groups and let them know about your hackathon.
- Organize talks.
- Organize or sponsor a party.
- Organize an event for students at your office before the hackathon.
- Appoint a student as an “ambassador” to help you promote locally in a specific department.

Phase 3 | Advance Preparation

Some things must be set up before the hackathon. These things take time and must be done on time. We've broken this down into one month before, the week before and one day before.

One Month Before

Here's what you should be doing one month before the hackathon.

Branding the Venue

This is an amazing place to make your brand prominent. Use it in the decor as much as possible and consider having a photo booth for pictures. Your imagination and budget should be your only limits.

Branding Your Merchandise

Cool things to give away are a must. Here are some ideas of what you can brand and give out at check-in:

- | | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Tote or canvas bag | Headphones | Sleeping mask |
| T-shirt | Toothbrush and
toothpaste | Earplugs |
| Notebook and pen | Anti-bacterial wipes | Anti-stress ball or fidget
spinner |
| Power bank | | |

Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner

Feeding participants at the hackathon takes preparation. So, this is the time to make arrangements because it's important to be all set when hungry attendees arrive.

Some golden rules for hackathons that you'll need to discuss with restaurants, caterers and sponsors are:

- You need plenty of coffee and water.

- Meals should be quick. Pizza, burgers, tacos and bagels are popular menu choices. Remember that you'll also need fruit and other snacks.
- If attendees have any special dietary needs or restrictions (vegan, peanut allergies), you should find out and make sure they are accommodated. We recommend asking them about their requirements when they sign up for the event.
- Sugar and salt are important, so ask your providers, sponsors and others who have had successful hackathons what you can do to strike the right balance.

Staff Allocation

If you're running an overnight event, you'll want to start rounding up staff to work in shifts so everyone can sleep, bathe, and eat. The sooner you can do this, the better. Depending on how many people you have, you can choose between 6 or 8-hour shifts. Here's a [sample schedule](#).

Mentor Allocation

You won't need all of your mentors to be available at the same time nor do you want to annoy participants with the same explanation five times in a row. Allocate mentor time throughout the event and don't schedule them for more than 1-2 hours. If you have this schedule worked out before you approach your mentors, they are more likely to agree.

Brief Your Host or Hosts

In the initial considerations phase, you should have identified and gotten agreement from a host or hosts to present the kick-off session, announce meals, enact the code freeze, and to emcee the final event. Now's the time to:

- Brief them.
- Determine the length of time they'll talk.
- Review any slides they might be presenting for the kick-off and update if necessary.

Licensing and Training

If the hackathon will be based on using a specific technology and it's not your company's technology, it's a good idea to check into licensing and find out if any training is needed. For example, if you're using OutSystems technology for your hackathon, one month before the

event is the time to talk to us about our licensing for hackathons and how to prepare participants.

Surprises!

This is the time to decide the cool things you'll be giving participants and then making sure they're reserved for the event. Examples include:

- | **Messages:** Contact a massage service and hire them
- | **Sleep Booths:** Work with a vendor to provide a place for quick naps.

The Week Before

It's almost crunch time. There are a number of things you'll want to do 5-7 days before the hackathon.

Close Registration and Send Reminder Emails

Probably no one will forget! But it's good to remind participants, judges, mentors and staff of the final details, including the venue, parking information and schedules. Your agenda should be final, you should close registration, and take down the page. [Click here to see sample emails.](#)

Final Orders

Now that you have a headcount for participants, you should finalize your orders for t-shirts, food, drinks, tables, chairs, giveaways and anything else.

Printing

In this crucial week, it's time to print all marketing materials that you need to provide at the venue or to participants. Make sure the printers know when to deliver and that they'll be ready to go to the venue on time. Here are things you'll want to print:

- The participants list (or use the [Eventbrite app](#))
- The evaluation form (for the judges)
- Print numbers to allocate teams to a table at the venue

The Day Before

This is the time to get everything set. To avoid stress, questions, and uncertainty, don't leave until it's done.

Here's what you need to do:

- Set up the check-in area (registration, merchandise, banners, etc.). This is where you greet the participants and they pick up their credentials and sign the terms and conditions, so it has to look sharp and have everything you need. Ideally, there will be a storage area you can organize so your staff has a place for coats, bags, and packages. If there isn't one, designate a separate room for storage and make sure it's set up as a place where staff can store things, eat, and rest.
- Put tables where they need to be for easy access to power and then make sure each one has the proper amount of paper, post-it notes, pens, and other things participants will need. Number the tables so everyone knows where to sit.
- Test the wifi one last time. Know what to do or who to contact if there's a problem.
- Set up the areas for food, rest, massages (if that's part of your package) and other necessities.

Phase 4 | The Hackathon

The big day is here! Time to run the show. Before the participants arrive, make sure that breakfast is set up and ready for them. Trying to get a meal ready while people stream in is rarely effective and can be stressful for everyone.

Welcome the Participants

Be sure everyone is ready in the check-in area before the doors open so they can start welcoming the participants the minute they arrive. Smiles are the most important thing at this point.

Kick-off Session

Your host will have arrived before this session, so he or she can be ready when the time comes to introduce the competition; present the staff, mentors, and panel of judges; and guide everyone through the agenda. The host should be prepared to answer any questions the participants might have quickly. Teams are eager to start!

Time to Eat

Half an hour before meals, get your “food court” ready. Empty trash cans, set up napkins and be prepared to feed all those hungry people.

Code Freeze

This is the time everyone needs to stop, and you have to be fair. No one should be exempt, nor should it be done in a way where some people keep working while others are shutting down. Participants can send you the projects or even take their computers to the final presentation but there should be no more coding (or developing).

Qualifying Round

If you have more than 10 teams in your hackathon, a wise strategy is to have a qualifying round for the top 10. Otherwise, your session will be too long and the judges won't be able to pay careful attention to each team.

To choose the top 10 teams, you ask all of them for a two-minute pitch while the judges listen and ask questions. The judges then pick the 10 finalists. After that, everyone will probably need about 15 minutes to breathe before the final pitches start.

Final Pitch

Yes, this is the critical moment. Teams will present their ideas and demos. The ideal time to give each team is 3-5 minutes. It's better if you allot time for the judges to ask questions. Another way to decide how long the pitch should be is to use this formula:

Available Time For Presentations/# of Teams.

Example: 90 min/15 teams = 6 min (4 min presentation + 2 min Q&A).

Record every team pitch and take photos.

Decision Time

Judges can take up to 30 minutes to make their decisions. It's a good idea to offer food, drinks, a fun activity or even a presentation to keep the participants occupied while they wait.

Announcing the Winners

Finally, you have winners. As you share the thrilling news, remember to thank everyone. Having your prizes close to the stage is helpful, too.

After-Party!

After the prizes are given out, a nice touch is to have a social hour or after-party where participants can converse and relax after such intense work.

Final Clean-Up

Once the participants leave, it's time to clean up. If you haven't hired a company to help, this responsibility falls on you.

Phase 5 | After the Hackathon

In the days after the event, you have a few-more things to do.

Follow-Up

You'll want to keep in touch with your participants and share the results with the world. Start by:

- Sending a follow-up email
- Posting follow-up tweets
- Publishing videos of the event

Another important follow-up activity is sending surveys to attendees, sponsors, judges, mentors and staff to gauge the success of the event from their eyes, things you can improve in case you do it again, and how satisfied everyone was. For participants, you should also ask, "Would you recommend this hackathon to a friend?"

Demonstrate Results

Share the videos of participant presentations or just make a final clip (for promoting your next hackathon). Gather your data and see if your goals were met; everyone needs to see measurable results.

Use Your Survey Responses

Take note from your surveys of the kinds of things that you should do differently next time around. Feel free to share information with us, and we can update the this guide.

Celebrate

Be sure you and your company toast your success and celebrate your team's effort!

The Final Word | The OutSystems Pitch

Consider a hackathon with OutSystems as the technology. Learning OutSystems is easy and it's also free.

However, it does take a little time to learn, and it's limited to Windows or Windows VMs. Depending on the type of development you expect (mobile or web), just send the following links to your participants:

- [Mobile](#)
- [Web](#)
- [If the participants are already OutSystems developers but have not used OutSystems 10 yet](#)

Mastering the courses takes about 32 hours (although it's possible for some developers to get going in a few hours), and in the end participants can apply for certification with a 50% discount.

Also, free licenses are available to companies who use OutSystems as their hackathon technology.

Download Your Templates

Head over to www.outsystems.com/1/hackathon-kit/ to download all the Hackathon Starter Kit templates, for details on everything from planning, to booking venues, to how to properly staff your event.

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