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Hackathons for Libraries and Librarians Internet Connection Column

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Abstract: Hackathons can be ideal opportunities for libraries and librarians to promote new services and tools. In these social events, attendees form teams and work on a project together within a given time limit. This article explains hackathons, provides a brief history, and details how libraries and librarians can get involved. Similar event structures, like hack days and edit-a-thons, are also considered.

When I told a friend recently that I was going to participate in a hackathon, she looked surprised and asked, "What are you hacking into?" She assumed it was an information security event. The word *hack* has taken on multiple meanings, so her guess wasn't absurd. In the news, *to hack* most often means to intrude or steal with malicious intent, as in *They hacked into government servers* or *Their website was hacked*. But among programmers and people who work in tech, *to hack* can also mean to put something together cleverly, quickly, or haphazardly: *They hacked together a new version of the program overnight*. This is the meaning of *hack* in *hackathon*, a social event centered around building small new tech projects. In this column, we'll review what hackathons look like, their history in brief, and how they might benefit libraries and librarians.

What is a hackathon?

In general, a hackathon is a time-limited event in which people form teams and work on a project together. At the end of the event, teams present their projects to everyone. Hackathons usually last anywhere from 4 to 72 hours (sleep optional). Projects tend to be technological, like building an app or a new feature for a website, but not all participants have to know how to code. Leadership, planning, research, design, and testing are also important skills here. Often, projects revolve around a theme, such as using civic data. While the goal is to have a working product by the end of the hackathon, good ideas with significant progress are acceptable, considering the short timespan.

The joy of the hackathon lies in creating something small quickly without having to worry about scale or risk, in a focused environment without much distraction. The end result could be a practical outcome that evolves into something larger, or it could be a fun diversion that ends that day. Hackathons are also enjoyable because they are social events. The ambiance of a hackathon ranges from the gentle buzzing of busy people working (think your local library's reading room) to a frenzy of speed-typing and cheering as the countdown clock approaches zero (think the timed hacking scene in *The Social Network*). It's both a networking opportunity and a team-building activity. It's a chance to learn new skills and show off honed ones. It's daunting and exciting, and the range of finished or almost-finished projects is delightfully unpredictable.

A brief history of hackathons

One of the first uses of the word *hackathon* was a promotion for the 1995 movie *Hackers*. Fans were given three assignments, "including the familiar 'Crack-the-school's-

computer-to-change-your-grade' hack" (Jensen 1995). But the first creative, communal gathering called a *hackathon* was organized in 1999 by OpenBSD, an operating system, according to OpenBSD itself and hackathon lore (Gottfried 2013). Ten developers met in a house and worked on software problems for a week until completion.

Hackathons since then have taken a similar approach, adding more structure and sometimes competition. In general, four kinds of organizations coordinate hackathons: open source software communities, tech companies, sponsored competitions, and community institutions. Many open source software organizations have followed in OpenBSD's footsteps to coordinate hackathons, including Wikimedia. The event is a good fit, as the open source software community relies primarily on group work and enthusiasm to achieve software goals. Tech companies organize hackathons as a way to encourage employee to build new features in a creative, relatively risk-free environment. Most famously, Facebook and Yahoo began organizing company hackathons in 2005 and 2006, respectively ("A Brief Open Source Timeline" 2015). Library vendors, too, have organized hackathons, including Ebsco in January 2016. Hackathons aren't always coordinated for members of a specific organization, though. Competitive hackathons bring together unaffiliated attendees who pursue fame and cash prizes at sponsored events. Large cash purses are offered yearly at TechCrunch Disrupt hackathons, drawing highly motivated developers who forego sleep in pursuit of glory. GroupMe, a group messaging app, is perhaps the most-cited competitive hackathon winner, having won first place at TechCrunch and gone on to obtain a large amount of venture capital (Crook 2012). Lastly, community hackathons are organized by educational institutions, neighborhood groups,

and other collectives. These hackathons tend to be smaller in scale and are usually more invested in building connections than products.

Hackathons and libraries

A hackathon can be an ideal event for libraries. Modular spaces that are designed for group activities are best for hackathon work areas, and a large space for final presentations is necessary as well. Patrons have requested power outlets and strong wifi for years — libraries with these in place have the physical setup to host a hackathon.

More importantly, hackathons can harness the spirit of libraries. Community, innovation, and outreach lie at the heart of library work. A hackathon is a fantastic opportunity to encourage the use of the tools and information that libraries have created and collected (Heller 2012). Many projects are inspired by available data, and libraries can guide attendees in using datasets they provide access to. For instance, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts hosted a Broadway Hackathon in 2015 and advertised “access to Broadway-related data from the archives of the library” (NYPL Labs 2015). Edmonton Public Library hosted an open data hackathon in 2014, specifically promoting data provided by the city (Carruthers 2014). In addition to strengthening offerings related to data, some libraries have also invested in makerspaces, ideal for innovative group work. For example, in February 2016, North Carolina State University Libraries hosted a Code+Art hackathon in their makerspace, wherein participants spent time learning about specific hardware and software (both provided) before breaking out into teams to create visualizations using sensor data for a competition (“Code+Art Hackathon” 2016). A hackathon may be an unexpected function for a library to some, particularly considering its

noise level, but organizing a social event around an interesting challenge is an engaging form of community outreach.

There are an abundance of how-to guides for organizing hackathons. Across the gamut, two recommendations are common: provide free food and find ways to get everyone involved. The former is a suggestion from which any event could benefit, but which is now an expectation for a hackathon. The latter is harder: presenting initial ideas, forming teams, losing steam, and asking for technical help are tough problems facing hackathon participants. These and a good deal of logistical issues are addressed in the Digital Public Library of America's hackathon planning guide, published in 2014 and written specifically for galleries, libraries, archives, and museums.

If the typical day- or days-long hackathon seems overwhelming, consider smaller hands-on events. "Hack days" or "code days" encourage group work on tech projects without the stress of a deadline or presentations. Internal hack days are a great way to familiarize staff with new technology. In January 2016, the Librarian Association of CUNY hosted one such hack day for MapBox and CartoDB, two online mapping apps. The presenter, Julia Pollack, walked attendees, including myself, through creating accounts with both apps and importing open data provided by New York City. By the end of the hack day, one of the outputs we had created was an interactive map of the 24 CUNY campuses. Bundling hands-on work with education is also a great way to introduce patrons to new tools or datasets offered by the library, and to ask for their feedback. The aforementioned Code+Art hackathon was structured interestingly in that participants spent two hours learning and two hours hacking. Another frequent educational event ending in *-thon* is a Wikipedia Edit-a-thon, organized regularly around the world. Rather than writing code,

participants write articles or add on to existing ones, learning the technical aspects of doing so along the way. Often held in public and academic libraries, these edit-a-thons can be geared toward filling in missing pieces in Wikipedia's coverage, such as women artists. These events also help to promote Wikipedia as a site for serious scholarship, pushing back against its stigma in academia (see Becker 2015).

Participating in a hackathon

Before dropping everything and starting to organize a hackathon (or a hack day or edit-a-thon) at your institution, consider attending one first to get your feet wet. If a hackathon hasn't come across your desk yet, a simple web search for "hackathon" and your city is a good start. If you are learning a new program or tool, search for hackathons organized by or for its enthusiasts. Eventbrite, the web event service, lists hackathons that have organized ticketing through their site. Some hackathons are scheduled as pre- or post-conference events, too, so skim the schedule of your next conference. Colleagues who code may also be in the know, as well as local groups like Code4Lib chapters.

Depending on the hackathon, having some technical skills will be useful. Don't worry if you don't identify as a coder: skills with data, metadata, design, research, and especially project management are all useful for a group project. Note that many hackathons encourage participants to come with an idea in their back pocket to propose to the group during an initial team formation time. Smaller hackathons usually have a more supportive environment. Larger hackathons are exciting but tend to draw serial hackathoners who are focused on winning. If you attend alone, it's a good chance to make

friends or establish professional contacts. Initiative and creativity are rewarded, as is playing well with others.

Hackathons are time-consuming. There should be an appropriate balance between your time and your takeaways. A company-sponsored hackathon may be a thinly veiled excuse to mine cheap new ideas for their product for free, for example, but if your main intent is to meet developers in that field, it may still be an enjoyable afternoon that results in something rewarding for you.

A hackathon is an unusual mix of things not usually seen together: skills improvement, instant socializing, presentation practice, and the chance to create something great — all within a day or two. Particularly for those accustomed to the slower pace of library work, the opportunity to build something quickly in a low-risk environment can be refreshing and rewarding.

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