



# Hackathon

## Hackathon as a digital youth work innovation method

This material describes the modified Hackathon framework that Verke has used to support new youth work innovation in practitioner training settings. Originally hackathons (also known as hack days, hackfests or codefests) have been design sprint-like events in which computer programmers and others involved in software development have collaborated intensively on software projects (Source: Wikipedia).

In our version, we invite youth workers to innovate new solutions to problems in the field on a very brief and short time scale. This is meant to serve two primary purposes: the condensed time scale forces youth work practitioners to move on very rapidly with innovating new solutions, which is often problematic in our field. Secondly, the inherent “pitching” in hackathons forces youth workers to clarify their concept and present it in unambiguous and precise terms.

This method has been tested in both national and international contexts, most recently in a youth work training course in Saudi-Arabia. The feedback is varied, with some hating the rushed process and others loving the intense way of working. Your results may vary.

In this document, we outline two versions of the process, which you may modify to suit your needs and youth work realities.

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These training materials have been developed as part of the ‘Digital Youth Work’ project, a strategic partnership between 7 organisations across Europe, to build the capacity of the youth work sector to deliver high quality youth work in a digital age.

They are based on training needs for practitioners identified by the EU expert group on digitalisation and youth's 2018 report.

The resources from all partners are available at [www.digitalyouthwork.eu](http://www.digitalyouthwork.eu). The project has been funded by Erasmus+.



## Considerations before implementation

### A common topic

We would suggest applying this topic only if there is a unifying theme in the setting. It is most likely enough if participants are merely developing "Innovations on youth work", even better if they are innovating youth work practices. But a mixed participant group in a general setting would most likely yield subpar results, or at least require a significant amount of time for participants to first find common ground to work from.

In our national event where we also use this method we initially divide participants based on different modes of youth work (and previously on different digital youth work topics) which the participants have pre-selected. We then further divide up the groups into smaller working groups of about 4-6 people, who then work on the final innovations.

### Facilitation

There are two options on how to structure a hackathon process. Each group can have a designated facilitator, or groups can work relatively independently. In the latter case, there also needs to be one person moving things along and be on hand in case any of the groups get stuck.

One integral part of the process, related to the "pitch" is to have often a panel of "judges" or experts on-hand to give feedback about the innovations the groups are producing. While the input can also come from the facilitator in a pinch, we would advise having people from the outside receive the pitch and give feedback. This way the ones offering the input are not aware of the group's ideas or progress and can provide their feedback based on the pitch as it's intended.



There needs to be a clear distinction between the roles of the facilitator and the experts; the facilitator is there to help the group move along and ask relevant questions without offering their (possible) expertise on the topic. The experts can also give feedback from the viewpoint of their own expertise in the field. This is even expected of them. If facilitators are giving the feedback as well, a separation of these roles needs to be clear.

## The pitch

Pitching the group's innovation is a very central part of this concept. Even if all other aspects of the framework were changed – timing, group sizes, topics etc. – we would still keep the pitch in play.

Part of the innovation process is the ability to describe your idea to others in a concise way that sells the benefits of the concept. The aim of having the pitch present in this youth work innovation process is twofold; it will help participants condense their innovation into very basic concepts while simultaneously training them to convince others of their idea. This helps bring new approaches to your work community, especially when you are not in a position where you could make strategic decisions by yourself.

A good pitch makes the listener feel interested, enthusiastic and keen to find out more about your project. However, it's not advisable to try to cram in too much information – instead, one should summarise. The purpose of a pitch is to inspire interest and not to overwhelm the listener with a barrage of facts.

During a pitch, all of the necessary information about the idea should be made apparent. The following questions can help outline a successful pitch:

- What is the problem or challenge that you are addressing?
- Who faces this type of problem?
- What is the solution?
- What benefits does the solution have for the person with the problem?

There should be several types of pitches. The “elevator pitch” is the most condensed one and should last a maximum of 90 seconds. It is advisable to start with a sentence that summarises the idea: “We want to measure the change in young voters' attitudes.”

The medium pitch can be used in the mid-part of the process to get feedback from the outside experts. This pitch should last a maximum of three minutes.



The most extended pitch can be the final presentation of the innovations, and these typically last for 10 minutes, including any feedback or discussion.

## Time pressure

Since the central aim of this method is to condense the innovation process, it is advisable to use a running counter. We have usually implemented it as a countdown visible on a screen; if participants are working in separate rooms, a separate (but synchronised) countdown needs to be provided for everyone. The countdown can also be handled by the facilitator if there is one. The added time pressure keeps things moving forward and keeps the focus on the essentials of the new concept or innovation. Several youth workers have expressed how they liked having the precise time-frame after the initial shock of seeing the countdown has worn off.

The two examples in this document are both real-world examples of implementing this method. The trick is to fine-tune your own time table depending on the topic being addressed, the skill level of participants, the number of people involved and the desired results. While it is clear that a 2-hour mini-hackathon will not provide as refined concepts as an overnight process does, both have their uses. Even a shorter process has the desired benefit of giving participants a new tool for innovating their own youth work practices in the future.

## Structure for innovations

There doesn't necessarily have to be a specified structure for how groups outline their innovations. We have implemented this method both with and without pre-set frameworks. In case you want some examples and tools on how to structure innovations and presentations in a youth work setting, we recommend our other material "Innobox", which is also available on [digitalyouthwork.eu](http://digitalyouthwork.eu).

## Other considerations

In our previous implementations we have used exercises and tools from several sources, including (but not limited to) our Innobox -concept. Any familiar tools



you are already comfortable with can be included in this process; the main elements are the time-intensive way of working and the pitch.

We have implemented the hackathon as just an innovation process with feedback in the end, and also as a competitive event where the expert judges chose a winning proposal in the end.

One further consideration is documentation and sharing, i.e. how the results of the innovation process are shared. In our implementation the participants do not "own" their innovations, but rather everything has always been openly shared.





## Time-frame example, 7 hours

### 10:00

Introduction of the process, time table presented for participants. Depending on size of the training event, division into smaller groups.

### 10:30

Warm-up exercises in mixed groups, zoning in on the topics to be tackled, proposing ideas for the topics. Participants choose which idea they want to work on and they can also choose a group with an idea other than their initial one.

### 11:00

Countdown starts. Groups start working on their concepts. Narrowing down the final topic, initial drafts of concept, division of roles within the group (i.e. if some people are better in pitching, they should be the ones to do it).

### 12:00

Break for lunch

### 13:00

Group work continues. Further revising the concept, finding outside resources, preparing for the first pitch.

### 14:00

Mid-pitch is given to outside experts or facilitator. A maximum of two people from the group should give the pitch, others can continue working.

### 14:30

Revising concept based on the first round of feedback. Evaluating the idea from several angles: feasibility, benefits, cost-effectiveness, originality, "wow-factor"...



## 15:30

Final touches, preparation of final pitch. Break for coffee.

## 16:00

Participants back in one place, 3-minute presentation of final concepts to plenary and experts. Round of feedback from the experts (3 minutes) and discussion (3 minutes). Choosing a winner after all groups have presented, if applicable.

*(Note: timing depends on number of groups in the training.)*

## 17:00

Closing



# Time-frame example, 2,5 hour mini-hackathon

## 10:00

Introduction of the process, time table presented for participants.

## 10:20

Outlining topics, division into smaller groups according to interest

## 10:45

Countdown starts. Outlining initial concepts / solutions, Immediately evaluating concept by originality, repeatability, benefits to target group etc.

## 11:15

Mid-pitch to experts / facilitators

## 11:30

Revision of concept based on feedback, preparing final pitch.

## 12:00

Final 2-minute pitch per group to all participants and experts. 2-minute feedback round from experts. Discussion.

*Note: timing depends on number of groups presenting.*

## 12:30

Conclusion



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YOUTH WORK

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