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HackTJ's Student's Tips for Organizing a Hackathon

By Niharika Vattikonda, Organizer for HackTJ and CEO of Teens Transforming Technology

Note from the Directors:

HackTJ is a student-organized hackathon run by Thomas Jefferson High School of Science and Technology, a school dedicated to STEM education and research located in Northern Virginia. HackTJ is currently in its fifth iteration, and has made a name as one of the largest and most established high school hackathons, with sponsors including Yext, Capital One, MongoDB, and Fannie Mae, and Major League Hacking. The event runs over the course of the weekend and is open to any high school student in the area, and has awards for best

Below is a guide to starting a hackathon written by this year's organizer of HackTJ. This document is meant to serve as a guide and detailed overview of what hosting a hackathon might look like, although details will vary with spacing, funding and availability needs. HackTJ is entirely student run, but we hope that you find this helpful and are able to adapt some aspects for your own school. As an alumna of Thomas Jefferson and past attendee of HackTJ, I can say that HackTJ was an incredibly fun event to attend and to approach the computer science material from class in a new, creation-focused way.

Best,
Olivia Zhang

o. Building a Leadership Team

This is the single most important step in creating your hackathon—a strong leadership team is comprised of complementary personalities and talents so that your hackathon has the greatest potential possible. We build our HackTJ Organizer team almost an entire year before our hackathon; members of the team continue to serve throughout high school, and every spring, we send out a new member application to freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. We prefer that no more than half of our team is comprised of seniors, so that we can ensure continuity for next year’s hackathon by training our younger members to take on larger roles in future hackathons.

Our team has about 15 members, and the hierarchy is simple: we have a lead coordinator and deputy coordinator of the team. We assign roles for the hackathon soon after the team is formed, and beyond the explicitly defined role assigned, organizers assist with two things: emailing sponsors and coordinating day-of logistics. Some of the roles we assign (sometimes organizers will double up or share different roles) include:

- Coordinating the sponsorship process and our partnership with Major League Hacking
- Working with catering vendors to provide meals (we do four meals at HackTJ)
- Working with vendors and school administration (this depends on the venue) for Internet access and extra electrical support (wiring and generators) for the event
- Managing the registration process and the hackathon website
- Branding—broadly defined to include designing the logo, choosing our color scheme, and ordering T shirts/lanyards/badges/stickers
- Recruiting mentors, volunteers, and judges from local tech groups
- Choosing prizes and developing the different prize categories we choose to offer
- Working with mentors and sponsors to create hackathon programming, including workshops on different concepts and APIs and fun social events
- Directing social media (Facebook and Twitter) posting, both before the event (to announce sponsors, registration, and mentor/volunteer signups) and during the event

1. Picking a Venue

Once you’ve established your leadership team, the first task is to establish a venue for your hackathon; once you have these details confirmed, it’s much easier to reach out to potential sponsors and to become a Major League Hacking (MLH) Member Event. You should begin exploring venues about a year in advance of your hackathon and should plan to book your venue at least six months in advance. When researching venues, it’s important to have a range of dates in mind—for HackTJ, we typically look at dates in late February, March, and early April, and since we host our hackathon at school, we look for three-day weekends in the school calendar. The three-day weekend helps us attract more hackers and, if the Friday before our hackathon is a holiday, it also gives us a day in advance to set up the venue during the day.

Now, for the venue itself: the most critical part of booking a venue is to make sure you have the right physical space that can fit the number of hackers you expect to be at the hackathon. There should be designated areas for hacking, sponsor tables, food, MLH (which usually offers a hardware lab for the hackathon as well), and (ideally) a quiet space for hackers to rest and relax. We usually have just under five hundred attendees and around a hundred sponsor representatives, mentors, and volunteers, so we assign areas as follows:

- Main Gym – designated hacking space and space for closing ceremonies
- Auxiliary Gym – functions as a cafeteria during meal times and a nap room after dinner
- Auditorium and Main Gym Lobby – functions as a cafeteria for our midnight snack and breakfast (and an extension of the hacking space)
- Classrooms near the Main Gym – designated workshop or panel spaces
- School Entrance Lobby – extension of the designated hacking space
- Auditorium – space for opening ceremonies

Once you've identified a few potential venues based on their ability to fit the expected number of hackers and the general layout of the space, there are a few more factors to consider. One of the largest issues we've had is being able to support all of our hackers' devices on our school WiFi network; you should be able to handle at least 2-3 devices per attendee. If your school or venue WiFi doesn't have the capacity for this many devices, you could look into purchasing or renting additional mobile hotspots for the weekend (sometimes, companies might be willing to sponsor these hotspots or lend you their equipment as part of a sponsorship package).

You also want to make sure you have enough power for all of the hackers, again assuming about 2-3 devices per student; since we know that our school doesn't have the electrical infrastructure to keep up with such a large number of devices, we hire an electrical company to provide a generator (costs about \$2000-\$2500 for the entire event) and we've purchased power strips to use at all the hacking stations in the Main Gym. A few other factors to consider when deciding a venue include audiovisual equipment (you'll need a mic to make announcements and a projector/screen for the awards presentation during closing ceremonies), whether the venue provides tables and chairs (otherwise, renting tables/chairs can be a major expense), and the overall accessibility and security of the venue.

2. Sponsorship

Your ability to raise funds for your hackathon through corporate sponsorship will undoubtedly make or break the quality of the hacker experience; established hackathons usually work with returning and new sponsors to ensure a relatively stable and growing budget annually, but if you're starting a hackathon from scratch, you'll have to find all the potential sponsors and begin reaching out to basically every company you can find. Also, your sponsors don't have to be just tech companies – a number of hackathon sponsors are other “normal” companies that have an interest in promoting STEM education or want to be involved in community events!

We have three different tiers of sponsorship: Bronze (\$1000), Silver (\$3500), and Gold (\$5000); the respective benefits for each tier of sponsorship include items like having a reserved sponsor table, being able to send company representatives, having the company logo on the T shirt, being able to pass out promotional materials, social media promotion, etc. While most of our sponsors typically choose one of these tiers, we are able to adjust the benefits for sponsors who aren't able to go up a complete tier but would still like to contribute a little extra money in their sponsorship total. For example, a Bronze sponsor may like to contribute an extra \$1000 rather than moving all the way up to the Silver tier of sponsorship; in that case, we'll work with the sponsor to identify which benefits from the Silver tier that they qualify for based on their additional contribution. Keep in mind that flexibility isn't just for benefits; you should also focus on working with sponsors who may be able to sponsor you in non-monetary ways (for example, lending mobile hotspots/other equipment or, in the case of restaurants, directly sponsoring a meal). Sponsors may also be able to host workshops, in which they can teach their API or a more general concept (like iOS game development); this provides a unique addition to the hacker experience that's especially helpful for new hackers.

Once you've established what tiers/benefits you'll have in your basic sponsorship framework, then it's time to get that information out there. The sponsorship outreach process boils down to:

1. Making a massive list of sponsor contacts: look at hackathon websites to get an idea of what companies have sponsored hackathons, look at company websites to find contacts for event sponsorship representatives, and reach out to people in your personal, school, or alumni network to see if they have a personal connection at some of these companies
2. Making contact via email: once you've identified an email for each potential sponsor, send a preliminary email, introducing yourself and the hackathon (I like include a request for a short phone call to discuss sponsorship further)
3. Follow up: once you've received a reply from a sponsor, focus on getting them all the information they need (this is normally encompassed by your sponsorship packet) and working out benefits so that the company can commit to a sponsorship package
4. Repeat steps 2-3 until you have enough sponsorship for your budget (see section 3).

3. Budget

Once you've acquired your hackathon sponsorship, the next thing to do (after you've mapped out all your estimated expenses in a budget spreadsheet) is to spend it! The majority of your purchases for the hackathon will fall under two main categories: hacker materials and meals. The first category, hacker materials, includes items like T shirts, lanyards, and badges. For these hacker materials, there are plenty of sites online that allow you to design and order products online, and the per-unit price for each of these items is typically lower for higher-volume orders (for example, five hundred T shirts). However, if you are able to get on the phone with a vendor

for one of these sites, you're often able to get a discount on the price per item, and when you're ordering so much of a single product, having even a few cents of a discount on a product can result in massive savings.

The second (and significantly more expensive) category is meals—we provide a total of four (dinner, midnight snack, breakfast, and lunch). Dinner and lunch are entirely catered, and for lunch we traditionally do a quick sandwich between the end of hacking and the closing ceremonies. Catering estimates for dinner and lunch usually range from \$7-10 per person, and by negotiating with restaurants, you might be able to get them to sponsor a meal rather than contribute through monetary sponsorship. For breakfast, we serve a mix of pastries and fruits from Costco, Einstein bagels, and Starbucks coffee; having a majority of the food options purchased from Costco helps us significantly reduce the costs for this meal. Our midnight snack is pizza, and since our school qualifies for a discounted price (about 50% off) through Papa John's, we're able to easily afford ~120 pizzas for our hackers, volunteers, and mentors. Between the meals, we provide snacks, bottled drinks, and hot chocolate; we get all of this from Costco (overall, we try to maximize the number of products we're getting from Costco, since buying this in bulk is much more affordable for a hackathon as large as ours).

4. Day-of Logistics

Our hackathon is normally Saturday-Sunday, and we try to find weekends that have the Friday before as a student holiday so that we're able to get all the necessary food and drinks from Costco and to set up our Main Gym for the event (this includes setting up all the tables and chairs for hackers/sponsors, working with the electric company to get the space set up, and laying out all the power strips/Ethernet cables you might need). For Friday setup, we try to recruit about 10-15 students who need service learning hours (we also split the shifts so that no volunteer has to stay for longer than three hours) to come help us unload the cars with purchases from Costco and to help us with the Main Gym setup. Having a student volunteer team join the organizing team for hackathon setup makes it possible for us to get through a significant amount of prep work for the hackathon.

Below is our hackathon schedule (the left column is Saturday, and the right column is Sunday), not including any social events, the Women in Tech panel, and any sponsor or mentor workshops. The start and end times for hacking are highlighted in green and red, respectively. In terms of booking caterers for meals, this schedule provides about an hour between delivery and serving to estimate for the time it takes to set up meals to actually be served (we also ask parent volunteers to come in for dinner and lunch to help us set these meals up—this is especially helpful during lunch, when we're trying to convert the Main Gym from a hacking space to set up for the expo and then, after the expo, to clear tables in time for the closing ceremony).

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| 10:00 AM | Gym Setup | 6:15 AM | Breakfast Delivered |
| 1:00 PM | Sponsors arrive | 8:00 AM | Breakfast |
| 1:00 PM | Student check-in | 11:00 AM | Lunch Delivered |
| 1:05 PM | Sponsors test A/V connections | 12:00 PM | Hacking Ends |
| 1:30 PM | Mentor check-in | 12:00 PM | Lunch |
| 2:00 PM | Mentor meeting | 12:30 PM | Setup for Expo |
| 2:00 PM | Opening Ceremony | 12:45 PM | Judging Meeting |
| 3:00 PM | Hacking Starts | 1:00 PM | Expo |
| 5:30 PM | Dinner Delivered | 2:30 PM | Judges Deliberate |
| 6:30 PM | Dinner | 3:00 PM | Closing Ceremony |
| 12:00 AM | Midnight Snack | 5:00 PM | End of HackTJ |
| | | 6:30 PM | Organizers leave |

Final thoughts...

What I've put here is essentially a framework for the most important tips I've discovered while helping run hackathons in my experience; as you go through a few iterations of your event, you'll understand what works and what doesn't, allowing you to custom-build your hackathon for the hackers you serve. If you have any questions, please send me an email at niharika@teenstransformingtechnology.org and I'd love to work with you to plan your hackathon.

About the Author:



Niharika is a senior at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology. She is currently studying computer science and economics in preparation for a career related to sustainable economic development at the intersection of technology and effective domestic and international policy. As a member of the Fairfax County School Board, Niharika works to make sure education policy accurately and equitably represents 21st century needs for 188,000 K-12 students. She also is the founder of Teens Transforming Technology, a student-run nonprofit that provides access to computer science for low-income neighborhoods and underrepresented populations from Washington, D.C. to San Francisco.

At school, she serves as the Director of Internal Affairs for Coding Lady Colonials, where she creates the annual computer science curriculum for all members, oversees the CSterhood mentorship program for younger students, and organizes her school's hackathon, HackTJ. Niharika also loves being a delegate in Model United Nations, in which she's been nationally ranked for her success in committees ranging from the U.S. Senate post 9/11 to Columbian Peace Talks, and enjoys reading and learning more about economic development using 21st century technology.