Hack Events: Another Way to Engage Employees in Process Improvement

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In my previous Article, we discussed some of the limitations of traditional process improvement efforts and explored one potential solution—crowdsourcing. However, there are additional methods that organizations can use to engage employees and create enthusiasm for process improvement.

In addition to the limitations we discussed last time, traditional process improvement methods also suffer when it’s unclear who the subject matter experts are and communication pathways aren’t enabled. This is often a problem in large dispersed companies, where it’s difficult for the process improvement team to identify key experts and establish a system for two-way communications for improvements. Communication and collaboration tools can make it easier for employees to submit ideas and for management to convey improvement opportunities, but employees still have to buy into the idea of process improvement for them to use these tools.

Hack Days and Hackathons

There are several definitions for different hack events, but we are going to focus this Article on two.

1. **Hack days** are informal events where organizations dedicate a specific amount of time (usually a day) every month for employees to work on whatever they want, as long as it applies to their job. This can range from process improvements to new product or service ideas.

2. **Hackathons** are formal events that span the entire organization. During hackathons, the organization provides a venue for employees to form work groups and come up with new ideas or solutions to business challenges.

Hack days address two limitations of traditional process improvement efforts (1) poor timing, and (2) lacking an employee engagement element. Hack days provide employees time to step back from their daily grind and work on problems that have come up in their processes during the month. Hack days also provide them the opportunity to take ownership of process improvements and focus on things that are meaningful to how they accomplish work.

Hackathons, on the other hand, provide organizations with the opportunity to overcome challenges related to identifying subject matter experts and cross-functional collaboration. Hackathons usually start with a kickoff presentation that outlines the structure of the competition and identifies the challenge(s) the organization is looking to solve. Employees then split off into ad hoc, cross-functional work groups (typically based on expertise and passion) to tackle the problem or co-develop an idea. The only parameter that holds true for every hackathon is that each group has to create a minimally functioning prototype of its solution. At the end of the hackathon, teams demonstrate their solutions to the rest of the organization and a panel of judges.
Hackathons vary from organization to organization. Some organizations include external experts or stakeholders in their events. Some focus the hackathon on a specific topic, while others use it as an opportunity for employees to solve problems that are important to them. However, there are a few key ingredients that help make hackathons successful:

- **Goal**—each group has to have a minimally feasible prototype by the end of the session. Setting a goal provides a sense of urgency and accomplishment.
- **Contests**—many hackathons offer prizes for the best solutions. This approach cultivates elements of play and competition. It also allows the organization to provide loose guidelines without breaking the spirit of exploration and independent development.
- **Fun**—the organization doesn't have to go so far as creating an 80's theme for its hackathon. However, a sense of play helps engage employees and differentiates the event from innovation workshops and brainstorming sessions.
- **Food**—most organizations provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and also have snacks available throughout their hackathons.

There are several other considerations that need to be addressed when developing a hackathon (e.g., voting procedures, access to reliable data, Wi-Fi, prizes, and venue). The Hack Day Manifesto can provide additional insight on how to address these issues.

### Not Just for Software Companies

When you think of “hack days” and “hackathons,” images of developers and engineers in companies like Google, Shopify, and Cognizant may come to mind. However, hack events are no longer just the purview of software companies. Other industries (e.g., city governments, banks, and telecommunications organizations) have embraced hack events to solve problems and generate new ideas.

**Bankwest** had a hack day it called “hack to the future” that combined ad hoc work groups with an 80's cult film twist. Bankwest’s hack day included trivia games, staff dressed as characters from the movie, and clips from the movie—all in an attempt to incorporate fun and a sense of play in collaboration. The topics explored during the hack day ranged from innovation ideas to process improvements.

**BT Group** (a telecommunications provider) holds hackathon-style events called “hothouses.” Hothouses are three-day competitive events that bring together individuals across business units and external groups (i.e., customers, suppliers, and partners) with an interest in a particular product or service. The attendees are split into cross-disciplinary teams and given a specific problem to solve. At the end of each day, teams present their ideas and progress. Teams are encouraged to attend each other’s presentations and steal ideas from one another. This reinforces exposure to a broader array of ideas and ensures the winning solution is a combination of the best ideas developed during the hothouse.
When are Hack Events the Right Approach?

Hack events may remind many readers of “brainstorming.” However, it’s important to distinguish hack events from brainstorming; albeit similar, these two approaches serve different business purposes. APQC defines brainstorming as a technique for generating creative ideas and solutions through group discussion. All participants are encouraged to suggest as many ideas as possible and no idea is judged initially. Brainstorming sessions are typically limited to small groups in order to keep them manageable. As a result, the ideas generated are only representative of the few people invited to the session. Brainstorming sessions are focused on a very specific problem that is typically dictated by management; hence, you are only solving established problems.

Brainstorming is a great tool when the organization is trying to solve specific problems and knows who the subject matter experts and key stakeholders are. Hack events, on the other hand, are best suited for creating an open environment to solve both known and unknown improvement opportunities.

Hack days and hackathons are not always the best solution for every process improvement effort. But they can be particularly useful in helping the organization:

- establish buy-in and engagement—employees have the opportunity to work on things they are passionate about and that affect them,
- support vertical and horizontal collaboration—employees are encouraged to work with others who are either interested in or affected by the same problem, and
- initiate a culture of innovation, continuous improvement, and collaboration.

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