

DEVPOST



# How to run an AI hackathon

# Table of contents

## [Introduction](#)

## [Before the hackathon](#)

[Define the audience](#)

[Determine your goals](#)

[Choose a topic](#)

[Decide on the event format](#)

[Select a hackathon platform](#)

[Set the timeline](#)

[Select judges and set judging criteria](#)

[Get executive buy-in](#)

[Establish the hackathon rules](#)

[Provide resources for participants](#)

## [During the hackathon](#)

[Support participants](#)

[Review projects for eligibility](#)

## [After the hackathon](#)

[Celebrate the best projects](#)

[Report on outcomes](#)

[Plan your next hackathon](#)

# Introduction



AI—and specifically generative AI—has taken the world by storm in a short period of time. Given that generative AI is new, rapidly changing, and can defy expectations, experimentation is crucial—and that's where hackathons come in.

A good AI strategy should engage developers and non-developers to build and experiment. There's a big demand from developers for this, too. AI is the #1 interest in our community and it has affected how developers brainstorm, build, and deliver valuable solutions.

**AI hackathons are not a new concept.** In fact, at Devpost we've been powering AI competitions like these for a long time:

- Amazon's Artificial Intelligence Hackathon, 2018
- Google's TensorFlow, 2019
- Meta's PyTorch, 2019
- Microsoft's Azure AI, 2019

But, as we know, LLMs have changed the game for hackathons in several ways. While a lot of the best practices for planning typical hackathons still apply, there are nuances to running an AI hackathon. Read on to find out how to successfully plan, manage, and wrap up an AI hackathon.

# Before the hackathon



## Define the audience

First things first—who is your hackathon for? Starting broadly, we typically see three types of hackathons: public hackathons, internal hackathons, and customer hackathons.

**Public hackathons** are events for an external audience. Participants are wide-ranging and might include experienced developers, students, non-developers, existing customers, and people who have never tried your product (just to name a few).

Hosting a public event allows you to reach a wide audience and is a highly successful developer marketing tactic.

**Internal hackathons** are events for employees within your organization. Employees typically need to be invited to participate, so you can choose to invite specific teams or departments or make the event open to all employees. The two primary goals of internal hackathons are to drive innovation and collaboration within your organization.

**Customer hackathons** are for smaller groups of customers or community members. These events are invite-only and allow you to engage, gain insights, and collaborate with a specific set of customers to drive revenue and engagement.

For example, if you hold training or workshops for your customers, following it up with a hackathon is a great way to cement the learnings from the workshop, keep people excited, and create long-lasting engagement.

## Determine your goals

Coming into hackathon planning with a clear sense of the goals will help set the stage for the rest of the planning process. Here’s a quick summary of what you can achieve with internal, public, and customer AI hackathons.

INTERNAL HACKATHON	PUBLIC HACKATHON	CUSTOMER HACKATHON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Find use cases for AI by allowing teams to experiment</li><li>● Use a hackathon platform to save time, drive participation, and report on outcomes</li><li>● Improve team collaboration and corporate culture</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Grow your developer community</li><li>● Gather feedback</li><li>● Incentivize new projects</li><li>● Drive awareness of your product (including your AI product)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Increase customer close rate</li><li>● Increase customer engagement rate</li><li>● Increase revenue</li></ul>

# Choose a topic

The hackathon topic will determine whether or not participants are excited to get involved. AI use cases are wide-ranging, so keeping the subject open-ended will give participants more room to experiment and will increase the likelihood of getting more submissions.

That being said, you can still include some boundaries to give participants some direction and to ensure the submissions help you achieve your goals. For instance, with both internal and public hackathons, the categories could pertain to a specific business vertical or customer type (e.g., productivity, health, finance, students, professionals, etc.).



## Internal AI hackathon topics

When choosing the topic for internal hackathons, we recommend using categories related to your business goals. Businesses are trying to figure out how to leverage AI to help them:

- Save time or money
- Grow revenue
- Delight customers
- Ensure business is strategically positioned (i.e., don't miss the future)

The hackathon topic should tie back to these goals. For example, you might consider focusing on lean operations and asking participants to suggest ways to use AI to save time on repetitive tasks.

You might also choose a topic focused on moving the company forward using generative AI, such as solving real-world customer pain points or driving open innovation.

AI companies can also leverage private guest hackathons, which are only open to a select group of customers as a way to drive product adoption and collect feedback.



**Pro tip:** Make your hackathons accessible to non-developers by including categories specific to them. This will help get more employees involved, improve collaboration, and likely result in a higher number of project submissions. A unique element of generative AI is that nearly anyone can create prompts.

To help keep things open-ended, you might consider providing participants with a list of problem statements to address bigger business challenges. This is especially useful when dealing with complicated problems that won't have an easy solution. For example, a multinational corporation might ask participants for solutions to help reduce its global environmental footprint. There is no single right answer, but an internal hackathon would be a great way to crowdsource ideas.

The goal of most AI hackathons is to find innovative solutions. With that in mind, consider rewarding out-of-the-box thinking with the judging criteria or bonus prizes.

## Public AI hackathon topics

Just like with internal hackathons, it's important to find a balance when selecting the topic for the event. It should be open-ended enough so that participants can experiment within the parameters, but also provide enough structure to ensure that what they're building supports your ecosystem.

If you're unsure of how specific to make the theme, consider how complicated it will be for participants to get access to, learn, and build with your tools. If it's challenging to get started, then we'd recommend keeping the theme broad as each extra step can deter participants and lead to ineligible submissions.

Public AI hackathons are a great way to reach vast developer communities. Consider using categories that help promote your product. If your product is an AI tool, you can leverage it to get more developers using it.

The topic or category can also help to highlight a specific feature of your product by asking participants to include it in their project submissions. For example, a software company could host a hackathon asking participants to use its technology to build AI/ML projects or models. Or, it might ask participants to build AI integrations into the company's products to improve user experience.





# Decide on the event format

There are three ways to host a hackathon. Check out the chart below to help you decide whether you should hold a virtual, in-person, or hybrid event.

Hackathon type	Why this?	When to avoid?
VIRTUAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accessible to people around the globe</li><li>• There's no limit to the number of participants, making these the easiest to scale</li><li>• Attracts more experienced professionals</li><li>• If it's a longer event, allows for more polished projects</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If it's important to the success of the event to have participants meet in person</li></ul>
IN-PERSON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Good for small, local community-building events</li><li>• Maximizes the element of fun</li><li>• Tends to attract participants who are earlier in their careers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When your participant pool is not located in the same place</li><li>• If your goal is to reach a wide audience</li><li>• If your goal is to generate highly polished project submissions—in-person events are often one to two days long so projects are more likely to be prototypes</li></ul>
HYBRID	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Terrific way to leverage an existing event or conference (e.g., can launch the hackathon at the event, promote the hackathon at the event, or announce winners at the event)</li><li>• Allows for engaging, in-person 'hack days' during the submission period</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When it isn't feasible to host an in-person component due to budget, timing, or logistics</li></ul>

# Select a hackathon platform

The number one way to save you and your participants time, and to help make sure your event runs smoothly is to choose the right hackathon platform. Using a purpose-built hackathon platform will simplify planning, save you time, and improve the participant experience. Here are hackathon platform features to look for:

ALL-IN-ONE PLATFORM	<p>Using an all-in-one platform means you can run your hackathon from start to finish with just one platform. This includes registration, submission, participant communication, reporting, judging, and winner announcements.</p> <p>It also holds all the information you need in one place like key dates, project requirements, rules, prizes, and judging criteria.</p>
PROJECT GALLERY	<p>A project gallery gives you a centralized place to showcase and point to all the projects—even long after the hackathon is over. This allows you to highlight winning projects, search by submission details, sort projects, and filter submissions to find exactly what you're looking for.</p> <p>On internal platforms, like <a href="#">Devpost for Teams (DFT)</a>, the projects are accessible to anyone with a user seat. On a public platform, like <a href="#">Devpost</a>, the submitted projects can be viewed by anyone.</p>
BUILT-IN JUDGING	<p>Built-in judging makes the process of reviewing and rating submissions easy for hackathon organizers and judges.</p>
DATA SECURITY	<p>Look for a hackathon platform with data security measures like robust encryption, secure storage solutions, and compliance with data privacy regulations. For more peace of mind, consider using a platform that is SOC 2 compliant.</p>
ESTABLISHED DEVELOPER COMMUNITY <i>(for public hackathons)</i>	<p>Choosing a hackathon platform with a large developer community will give you access to a wide audience to promote your hackathon. In Devpost's case, we've built a strong relationship with our four million users and we've made it easy for developers to find hackathons that align with their skills and interests. We can also help you tailor your hackathon so it stands out.</p>
SINGLE SIGN-ON <i>(for internal hackathons)</i>	<p>SSO access makes it easier and more secure for your internal participants to join your company's hackathon.</p>

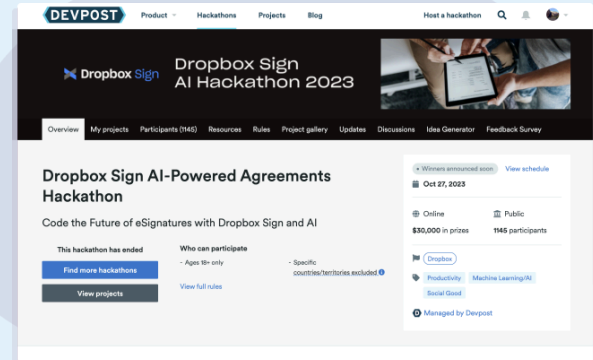
# Run better hackathons with Devpost and Devpost for Teams

## DEVPOST PUBLIC HACKATHON PLATFORM

### The world's leading online hackathon platform.

Powering 80% of the world's hackathons. Built with intuitive features to reduce your workload and increase participation.

- Team-building
- Participant communication
- Judging and public voting
- Project showcase gallery



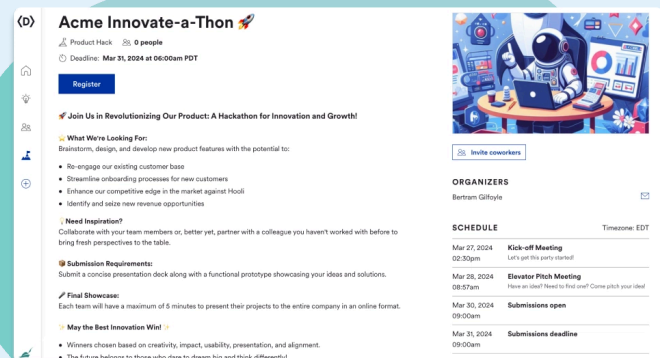
Ready to transform your hackathons? [Schedule a demo](#) and see how you can take them to the next level today!

## DEVPOST FOR TEAMS

### Run seamless internal hackathons with an all-in-one platform.

From registration and team building to collecting and judging submissions. Do it all effortlessly in a unified online hackathon platform.

- Foster innovation
- Increase participation
- Save organizer time
- Boost event ROI



See how Devpost for Teams can streamline your employee hackathons—[book a demo](#) today and unlock your team's full potential!

# Set the timeline

When you're deciding on the length of your hackathon, it's a fine balance between making it long enough that participants have time to build their projects, but also short enough to create a bit of urgency.

## Timeline for public hackathons

We typically recommend allocating 2-3 months from start to finish for:

- **Registration and submission.** Allow 6-8 weeks so there's time to promote the event and participants have time to build their projects.
- **Judging.** Allow 1-2 weeks to work around the judges' schedules and ensure that there's enough time for potential project screening and testing.
- **Post-event wrap-up and marketing.** Allow 1-4 days after the winner is selected so there's time to schedule marketing or communications around the announcement.



## Timeline for internal hackathons

The timing varies a lot depending on the number of participants and the goal of the event. Employee hackathons are often a few days or a week, and sometimes even a month if you want extra, optional time for team-building or technical tutorials. Short events will result in elevated proof of concept projects, whereas a longer event will lead to more built-out projects and prototypes.

It's important to consider your participants, too. A longer timeline will be more accessible to a broader audience since it's more likely to accommodate people who are out of office or busy with other commitments.

# Select judges and set judging criteria

The judges of your event and judging criteria have a direct impact on the participation rate and quality of project submissions. Here's how to set up your judging for success.

## Select judges

Your judges can have a huge impact on the success of your event. From generating buzz to helping get the word out, they have a bigger impact than you may think. Selecting judges is an opportunity to create excitement and buy-in at the same time.

For public hackathons, consider reaching out to business partners or others in your network who have a deep understanding of AI. Ask your CEO to judge—participants love it when important people view their work!



**Pro tip:** Try to get executives as judges. This helps drive participation and visibility within the company. Aim for an odd number of judges to break any ties.

## Set judging criteria

Making the judging criteria available to participants from the beginning will give them a better understanding of what you're looking for in their submissions. We often recommend judging on what we call "The Three I's":

- Idea (quality of the idea)
- Implementation (quality of the technical implementation)
- Impact (the extent to which it impacts a stated goal or community)

# Get executive buy-in

Get your company's executives involved while you're still in the planning stage. You'll want to go to them early—and definitely before launch—because their buy-in is likely to drive participation in the event.

Here are five ways to get executives involved:

1. **Show them how you can help.** Ask what categories or problem statements might be useful to their business and incorporate them into the hackathon. If they've been struggling to implement AI into products or processes, you'll be able to offer them ideas and solutions from a vast developer community or from the experts in your organization.
2. **Invite them to be judges.** This will help increase participation and submission quality, and give executives more visibility to the submitted projects.
3. **Ask them to help promote the event.** For public hackathons, ask them to share the event with their networks through LinkedIn. For internal hackathons, ask them to promote the event through your organization's internal communication channels—whether that's through email, Slack, or your company's intranet.
4. **Encourage them to act as mentors or subject matter experts (for internal hackathons).** Getting executives from multiple departments involved will help drive participation and likely result in higher-quality project submissions.
5. **Ask them to meet with the winners as a prize (for internal hackathons).** Not only is this a great incentive for participants, but it also creates an opportunity to discuss how to start implementing the winning projects.



# Establish the hackathon rules

Rules are necessary for every type of hackathon. Given the massive growth in the capabilities of generative AI, it's highly recommended to include clear rules about how participants can or should use AI. For example, can participants submit simpler proof of concept projects or do they need to be more functional? Are prompt-only projects acceptable or do you require more complex API integrations? The rules of your event should answer these questions.

The process of setting rules is different for public and internal hackathons.

## Rules for public AI hackathons

Rules are the governing document of the competition. Public hackathons on Devpost are required to have rules and they are also required by international competition law.

Setting the rules for public hackathons requires companies to work with a lawyer or a company like Devpost that has extensive experience with skill-based software competitions.

## Rules for internal AI hackathons

There's more flexibility when setting rules for employee hackathons than there is with public hackathons. However, an internal hackathon should still include guidelines to keep projects on track and ensure submissions follow internal policies.

DFT, Devpost's internal hackathon platform, has built-in tools to help with this including project requirements, deadlines, scheduler, and announcements.



**Pro tip:** Be sure to include any company-specific compliance and security requirements that dictate how participants can (or can't) use generative AI for business projects.

# Provide resources for participants

One of the main ways to improve project submission quality as a hackathon organizer is to provide participants with the technical resources they need to build great projects. AI is transforming quickly and it requires a lot of experimentation and research for developers trying to build with it. Participants are already under a lot of pressure to finish their projects in time, so giving them easy access to helpful resources will go a long way.

Using a hackathon platform will make it a lot easier for you to get these resources to participants. For public hackathons on Devpost, you can store all technical resources and tools in the Resources tab.

If you're hosting an internal hackathon, you can use the built-in GenAI hack template on Devpost for Teams (DFT) which already comes pre-loaded with resources you can provide to participants. It includes AI basics for non-technical beginners, problem statements across various departments, a starter list of some of the many AI tools out there, AI code, AI text generators, and AI image generators.

Use the checklist on the next page to see what technical resources to provide participants.



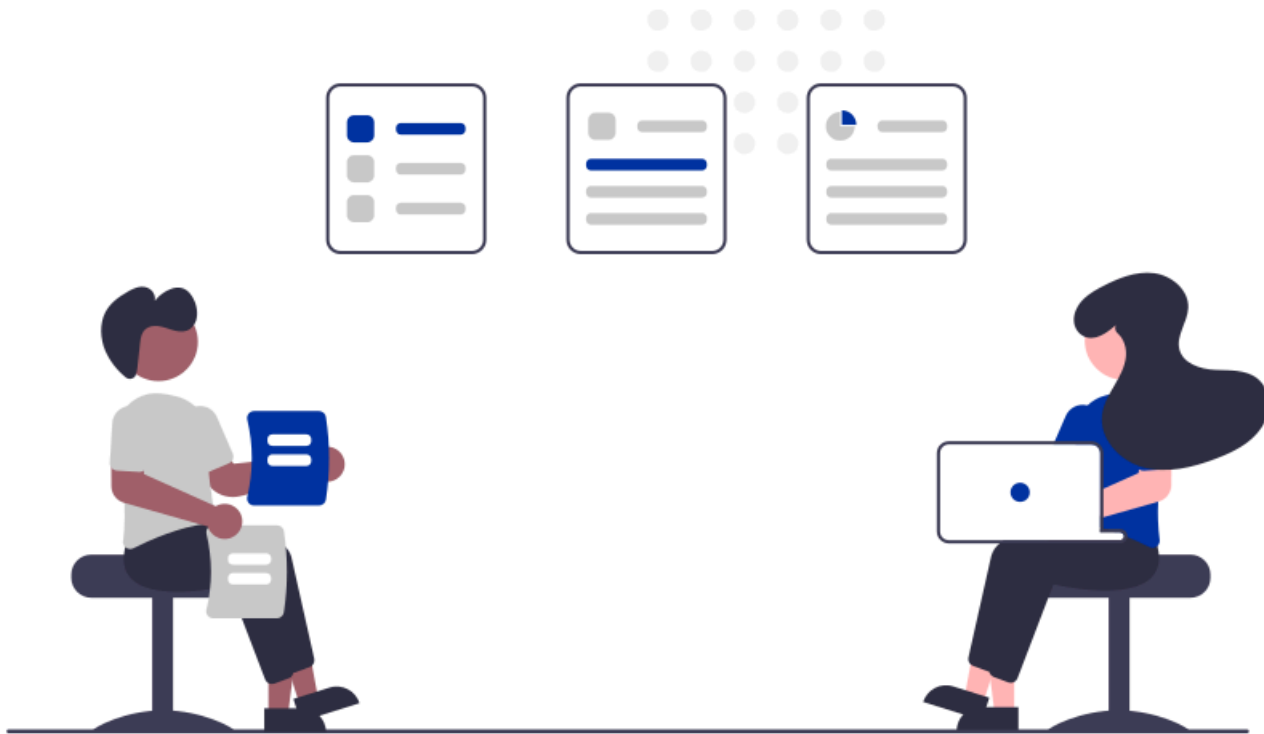


# Checklist: What to provide participants in your AI hackathon

*Provide participants with these technical resources to get higher-quality project submissions*

- ☐ Example project code
- ☐ Chat support – e.g., answering participants' questions on Discord/Slack
- ☐ Project ideas list for inspiration
- ☐ Specific datasets you'd like them to use
- ☐ Public datasets they might find useful
- ☐ Prompt engineering resources
- ☐ Tutorials on using your platform (for public hackathons) – e.g., workshops, video courses, etc.
- ☐ Sample applications
- ☐ Developer tools – e.g., API and integration tools, AI tools, and hybrid transactional/analytical processing tools
- ☐ Credits or free access to tools that cost money—AI computing power can be expensive and participation should not require payment

# During the hackathon



Managing a hackathon doesn't end when you hit 'publish' on a new event. In fact, the most successful hackathons we see at Devpost make the most of this time by building relationships with participants and getting a head-start on reviewing projects.

## Support participants

Offer support to participants throughout the hackathon to help them have the best experience possible. They'll be more motivated to build a great project, more likely to submit on time, and more likely to participate in your next hackathon.

### Check-in with participants

Send participants updates regularly to give them deadline reminders, helpful resources, and an opportunity for them to ask questions.

Kick things off by sending out a ‘Starter Kit’ to registrants. Here, you can include helpful information like an overview of what to build, key deadlines, steps for getting started, and instructions on what to submit.

Throughout the event, send relevant updates such as information about new feature launches, answers to common questions, or reminders about where to find resources.

For **public hackathons**, we recommend scheduling updates every one to two weeks throughout the event. This will keep your event top of mind for participants—without spamming their inbox.

The Devpost platform has three default updates that organizers can use:

- Final call update sent three days before the deadline
- ‘Public voting now open’ announcement for hackathons using the public voting feature
- Winners announcement

For **internal hackathons** or events that are less than one week long, we suggest sending daily updates.

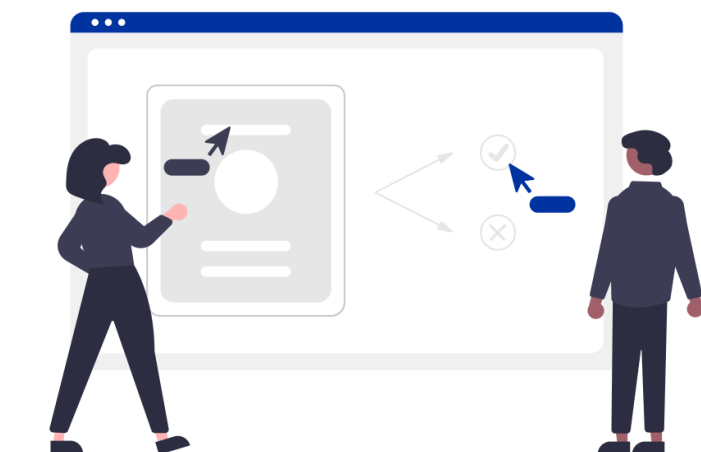
### Offer technical support throughout the event

Along with providing technical resources to participants, ensure that they have a channel to ask questions about your product, tools you’d like them to use, or the submission requirements. We often recommend organizers create a Discord or Slack channel for their hackathons.

## Review projects for eligibility

You don’t need to wait until the hackathon has ended to start reviewing submissions. We actually recommend the opposite. Start reviewing projects for eligibility as soon as they’re submitted.

Participants can edit their submissions up until the deadline date. So, if they’re missing a key requirement, let them know as soon as possible so they can correct the issue in time. This will help ensure you have as many viable project submissions as possible. Expect to receive the most submissions in the final few days.



# After the hackathon

You made it to the end of your hackathon—congrats! Now it's time to wrap up the event and maximize its ROI. Here's how.

## Celebrate the best projects

Your hackathon's winning projects are the shining example of what these events can achieve. Make a splash by celebrating them through the appropriate channels. For internal hackathons, connect with your internal communications team or use company-wide channels to highlight the winning projects. For public hackathons, be sure to include the winning projects in your post-event marketing.



# Report on outcomes

Showcase the results of your hackathon by reporting on the following data points:

- Number of participants
- Number of projects
- Interesting demographics – e.g., how many countries were represented, how many cross-functional teams participated, etc.
- AI use cases generated in the hackathon
- Top projects
- Quotes from project pages or feedback surveys
- Any next steps on the projects
- Event reach (for public hackathons) – i.e., social media engagement, media mentions, etc.

Both Devpost and DFT have built-in metrics to track and report on progress and outcomes. It's easy to pull reports to dive into project and participant data.

For **public hackathons**, use Devpost reports to track and show conversion data, participant demographics, progress data, and project data. For **internal hackathons**, use the built-in metrics reporting on DFT to track and report on progress and outcomes.



# Plan your next hackathon

AI is evolving at lightning speed—and so are its use cases for your business. Use the energy generated by your most recent hackathon to kickstart planning for the next one.

Use the learnings from your first AI hackathon and apply those to your next one. We're at the beginning of understanding exactly how to leverage AI and its potential seems endless. Hackathons are a great way to uncover the possibilities of using AI—whether that helps your business work more efficiently, earn more revenue, develop new strategies, or simply have fun.

## Uncover new opportunities to use AI in your business.

[Talk to our team](#) of hackathon planning experts to learn how to run your AI hackathon.

