



## TRYING TO HACK COVID: MY EXPERIENCE HYPERLOOPING TEAMS INTO THE FUTURE OF REMOTE INNOVATION

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*Are you making the most of virtual collaboration to inspire and boost innovation? A 48-hour, virtual hackathon might just shake it out of you, as it did me.*

Marathons the world over are on pause, but fear not those of you who like to engage in a herculean effort to move forwards. Because in their place, COVID-19 has brought virtual hackathons to the masses, and they have become mainstream almost overnight.

As an innovation professor, I always still have something to learn. But especially so, it turned out, from participating in a virtual hackathon which I just so happened to sign up for, and which was about finding solutions to COVID-19 related problems.

A hackathon is, traditionally, a physical event in which computer programmers and others involved in software development come together to collaborate intensively within a restricted timeframe on new software projects.

As the name suggests, in a virtual hackathon everything from registration, to communicating, to collaborating, to solution submission and judging happens online.

Due to COVID-19, companies and governments are employing them increasingly to leverage available and untapped collective intelligence by inviting and engaging masses of participants simultaneously from across different geographies and time zones.

The ultimate goal is to find actionable solutions to real-world problems in a very short period of time, often just 48 hours.

Besides boosting innovation and driving organic growth in the corporate setting virtual hackathons are also used to jumpstart a modern way of working, fostering a culture of learning and a growth mindset. They help develop leaders, and promote diversity and inclusiveness.

What if, as a leader, you approached a virtual hackathon as a vehicle for bringing people together and bring ideas to life while generating actionable solutions to pressing challenges within your organization?

Now, you might ask why you would want to challenge the traditional innovation process. Well, could speedily leveraging the untapped collective intelligence of thousands of stakeholders be a big part of the answer? Indeed, imagine that in only 48 hours, you could crowdsolve problems with a large pool of stakeholders, creating prototypes of solutions and accelerating innovation.

The results are working prototype that you can use immediately to initiate value-creating conversations with customers and other stakeholders to accelerate innovation and decrease time-to-market of your products and services.

Done in the traditional way, this process would take months and only benefit from the input of selected experts.

In this context, can you see the same appeal that I did of “hacking away” old ways and accelerating innovation?

## **Learnings from a virtual hackathon**

As a professor of innovation and strategy, my research interests lie in innovation management and I am fascinated by new, technology enabled and inclusive approaches to accelerating innovation.

For innovation you need inspiration. Creative ideas can come from anyone and anywhere. Successful innovators draw inspiration from multiple perspectives: the more the better. But innovation also relies on responding and adapting to change, discipline (structure), alignment and a clear link to an overall vision.

At its core, innovation is a social phenomenon. It is all about people. A sense of purpose, high level of group motivation and active participation in the name of enabling organizational culture directly impact its success or failure.

Now take traditional innovation and breathe a new lease of life from the virtual stratosphere into it. Indeed, the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic is set to supercharge virtual communication. But how can leaders get their money's worth from turning virtual communication into value-adding and productive remote collaboration?

Enter the virtual hackathon for hyperlooping teams to remote collaboration and accelerated Innovation.

### **A virtual hackathon that turns on the bright lights of innovation**

In April of this year, I signed up to participate in the [Swiss #VersusVirus virtual hackathon](#). The goal of the government-supported event was to take an inclusive approach to crowdsourcing innovative solutions to the COVID-19 crisis and rapidly so.

Everyone, regardless of their background, skills or knowledge was invited to participate. My curiosity had been piqued by the experiential value that I imagined would come from stepping into the future of accelerated innovation. I was in hyperloop mode.

So what's in an innovation-focused virtual hackathon?

For us, we drew on the skills of the team [to create an Uber-like App](#) that connects anyone who has groceries and connects them with anyone who has transport. We did so having identified bottlenecks in the supply chain.

Obviously, you can't do everything in 48 hours. But there were results: for example, we started seeing changes such as increasing deliveries of groceries by delivery companies such as Smood.ch that traditionally delivered take-away food from restaurants.

As the hackathon weekend unraveled, I came to identify six equally important key takeaways from my virtual collaborative process:

## **Six takeaways of a virtual hackathon from a team perspective**

### **1. Come with an explorer mindset**

Do not underestimate the courage a virtual collaboration requires. Embrace curiosity and come with an open, learning mindset.

When you first sign into the virtual collaborative platform, there is a hive of activity to get your head around. You can interpret this as stress, or excitement. But, just like an explorer, if you're not curious – and patient – then you might as well give up then and there.

I threw myself into a problem that affected me personally, joining the team working on: “How to extend the Swiss online delivery network for grocery products under COVID-19.”

### **2. Bonding is key**

Hackathons should include games to facilitate socializing (e.g. icebreakers), to build mutual trust and help your team get to know one another quicker. From a round of “truth or lie” to a guess-the-movie-by-typing-in-the-emojis game, there are many virtual exercises you can go about to start the team off on the right foot, that is: humanizing the online environment.

It is critical that virtual collaborations address relational human needs and these require a feedback loop in order to flourish in the virtual space. Respectful bonding, trust, clear expectations, shared leadership, fun and play all nourish team creativity and feed the resilience required to complete the task at hand.

### **3. Agree on rules from the outset**

Emphasize respectful discourse, constructive criticism, and define the balance and expectations of autonomous versus collective efforts. Introduce the collaborative tools that will be utilized to ensure a time-bound project delivery.

During a virtual hackathon, you can find yourself serving a higher purpose than you may believe in even if you don't like what you're having to do.

The individual who naturally sets out to be leader may find him/herself challenged. The individual who is clearly trying to win to achieve financing may well be caught out. In the hackathon environment, you cannot avoid your common purpose and that comes back to strategy. In an office, you don't often question these dynamics.

In the virtual team setting, it's important to have a team leader but that person isn't the decision maker by default. The team leader facilitates, and makes sure the team keeps time and follows step: you are facing a problem-solving process with a clear time constraint attached to it. It is the team effort that inevitably has to come to shine and not that of any one individual.

And so, in a hackathon you find yourself asking others questions than you probably wouldn't in the office. No one is controlled, but people show up for the team anyway.

Indeed, purpose has to underpin any collaboration in order to trigger that initial motivation and feed it throughout the process. In my virtual hackathon experience, it was a deadly virus

that brought me to the table. For organizational settings, the collaborative purpose must align with the overarching business strategy and the company vision.

#### 4. Schedule in play and self-care

A virtual hackathon is very intense effort. Work hard and deliver, yes. But ensure your team has fun too, and don't skimp on adequate time for self-care.

I ended up cooking often during my virtual hackathon weekend. I found it helped me refresh my mind and regain energy, as did frequent bouts of stretching. We all know we should have these breaks in the day but a hackathon makes the need blatant.

#### 5. Celebration is key

Every milestone towards completion is important. Hackathons are an excellent reminder of the truism that we should value the journey as much as the destination. By recognizing effort, you make your team visible to itself, and trust is also strengthened.

You will come to find your role in the team and maybe yours, like mine, will be making sure celebrations happen because, more widely, you give energy to the team. Bottom line: share music and have that *apéro*.

#### 6. Meet in person

This is the relational cherry on top for participants. It reinforces bonds and supercharges your team's connection for the future.

Our team was very curious about meeting up, as we found ourselves to be an effective team. Hackathons can become an opportunity to meet like-minded people. They provide a chance to identify business partners and let friendships develop. In addition, they could become an important recruitment tool of the future.

I think the value here comes from the fact that they remove you from your usual role and enable you, and others, to see what else you're good at. Note to leaders: let your employees live other sides to themselves.

### Accelerating innovation through virtual collaboration: 6 rules of thumb

1. **Dare to try:** attempt something new and step out of your existing comfort zone – that is where learning can happen.
2. **Humanize virtual teams:** take time for bonding and to establish trust whenever you meet remotely. Humanize relational connection.
3. **Add structure & discipline:** encourage respectful and open discourse, set discipline and expectations – deliver on time, combine autonomous and collective effort, and embrace technology to support collaboration.
4. **Balance work & play:** relax, socialize, have fun, laugh (including about yourself), play games, and listen to music together.
5. **Celebrate:** acknowledge milestones as a team, celebrate small wins is energizing and motivating to continue.
6. **Value real life connection:** physical meetings strengthen bonds, reaffirm the team's internal culture and value, building long-term relationships.

## **The hyperloop element**

A hackathon is an enabler: it gets the ball rolling.

My virtual hackathon experience offered me a glimpse into how our teams will routinely collaborate in the virtual sphere in the future. I saw clearly the agility with which they will be called upon to engage in intensive, time-bound productivity. As such, it offered me the opportunity of hyperlooping to the future of working.

We absolutely must equip both ourselves and our organization's team culture with the necessary skills to not merely float but to embrace the virtual sphere, and thrive in it. It is crucial homework for the new normal.

At the same time, we must accelerate innovation and build key skills into our teams such as curiosity, creativity, collaboration, ownership, resilience and adaptation. Taken together, as we have seen, innovation and virtual collaboration make happy bedfellows.

Are you ready to hyperloop your teams to the future of virtual collaboration and see how your organization's innovation skyrockets?

We won, by the way.