

How to Host a Civic Innovation Hackathon in Your City

Created by City of Seattle's Innovation & Performance Team

Overview

This toolkit is designed to help cities, community organizations, and innovation teams plan and execute a successful hackathon. It draws from Seattle's Community Innovation Hackathon model and includes templates, roles, and best practices to ensure your event is inclusive, impactful, and well-organized.

Step-By-Step Planning Guide

1. Define the Purpose & Challenge

- Identify a civic or community issue that needs creative solutions.
- Frame a clear, compelling challenge prompt.
- Decide if you want to do a hackathon using technology or more of a non-technical, design focused hackathon.
- Ensure the challenge is equity-centered and relevant to your audience.

Sample Challenge Prompt: Youth Programs Catalog

Problem Statement: We need a “smart catalog” that supports content discovery.

The Hackathon Challenge: Transform unstructured youth program and activity data from City webpages into a catalog format that supports content discovery. Most of these webpages are listed in the provided spreadsheet. The catalog format, at minimum, should include these fields:

- Organization name
- Program description
- Activity name
- Activity description
- Location
- Age range

Step 3: Package Data for Participants

To make data accessible and usable:

- Create a shared folder or webpage with all datasets and documentation
- Include a data dictionary or brief guide to help teams understand what's available
- Offer sample queries or visualizations to spark ideas

Step 4: Include a Data Briefing

Kick off your hackathon with a short data walkthrough:

- Highlight key datasets and what they show
- Explain any limitations or gaps
- Encourage teams to combine data with lived experience and community insight

3. Identify Community Partners

Look for organizations that align with your hackathon's mission or challenge theme:

- Local nonprofits working in equity, tech access, or civic engagement
- Universities or community colleges with innovation, design, or computer science programs
- Tech companies or startups interested in civic tech or social impact
- City departments or public agencies with overlapping goals
- Libraries, innovation hubs, or co-working spaces that can offer space or outreach

Outreach Tips:

- Craft a brief pitch explaining the hackathon's purpose, audience, and potential impact
- Be clear about what you're asking for: space, funding, mentors, judges, food donations, or promotional support
- Offer visibility and recognition in return (e.g., logo placement, speaking opportunities, social media shoutouts)

Types of Support to Seek:

Type	Examples
In-Kind Donations	Food, beverages, swag, venue space
Financial Sponsorship	Covering prizes, materials, or staffing
Expertise	Mentors, judges, or speakers from partner organizations
Promotion	Sharing the event through newsletters or social media

Whenever possible, involve partners early in shaping the challenge or event design. This builds shared ownership and ensures the event reflects community needs and values.

4. Design the Event Flow

Use the run of show template to structure your event. The example below is the short-form version of a hackathon but can be adjusted to be longer by adding additional hacking and/or judging time. You could also include an open mic for participants to share lessons learned, tools used, or approach in lieu of presentations and judging:

Time	Activity
4:00–5:00 PM	Setup
5:00 PM	Doors Open & Registration
5:30 PM	Welcome & Challenge Overview
6:00–7:55 PM	Hacking Time
7:55–8:45 PM	Team Presentations & Judging
8:45–9:30 PM	Awards & Cleanup

5. Recruit & Assign Volunteers

Use the Volunteer Opportunities template to fill key roles:

Role	Responsibilities
Set-up Crew	Prepare venue, signage, tech, and materials
Registration Team	Check in participants and form teams
Mentors	Support teams with feedback and guidance
Judging Support	Coordinate presentations and collect scorecards
Food Crew	Manage snacks and meals
Cleanup Team	Restore venue post-event
Trash Monitor	Keep event space clean and sustainable

6. Prepare Judging Materials

Use the Judging Scorecard Template to evaluate teams on criteria can be adapted to your particular civic challenge:

- Innovative, Responsible Use of AI (or other tools you are providing)
- Clarity & Reviewability
- Creativity & Originality
- Feasibility
- Impact
- Repeatability

Each category is scored out of 10 points, for a total of 60 points per team.

7. Logistics Checklist

Ensure you have the following:

- Name tags (pre-numbered for team matching)
- Printed run-of show, talking points, checklists, slide decks and instructions
- Tablets or laptops for check-in
- Pens, markers, chargers, hand sanitizer
- Scorecards, clipboards, judging materials
- Food and beverages
- Cleanup supplies and signage

8. Recruit Participants

A successful hackathon relies on the diversity, enthusiasm, and skills of its participants. Your recruitment strategy should emphasize attracting a wide array of individuals who offer unique perspectives and expertise to the event. We typically recruit 4 weeks in advance of the event, with a final push a week before. **Below is our approach:**

1. Target Audience

We aim to recruit participants from a variety of backgrounds, including but not limited to:

- Students (undergraduate and graduate) in computer science, human centered design, business, and related fields
- Professionals in tech, innovation, and entrepreneurship or who have subject matter expertise within the hackathon challenge
- Community members with an interest in problem-solving, civic tech, or social impact
- Underrepresented groups in tech to ensure inclusivity and diverse collaboration

2. Outreach Channels

To maximize visibility and engagement, leverage:

- **University partnerships:** Collaborate with local colleges and student organizations
- **Professional networks:** Reach out to colleagues from past and current work
- **Social media campaigns:** Promote through LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook using targeted hashtags and visuals
- **Email:** Distribute through partner organizations and mailing lists
- **Community boards and forums:** Post on platforms like Devpost, HackerEarth, and Reddit or through CivTech forums such as U.S. Digital Response

3. Incentives for Participation

To encourage sign-ups and sustained engagement, offer:

- Prizes and recognition for top teams
- Networking opportunities with mentors, sponsors, and industry leaders
- Workshops and learning sessions before and during the event
- Certificates of participation and potential internship or job opportunities
- Feature the winners in a blogpost or news article to showcase their solution

4. Registration Process

Participants should be asked to register through an online form that captures:

- Use an event registration like Luma or Eventbrite to manage registration and send out communications about the event
- Ask for the following information from participants:
 - Basic information (name, email, affiliation)
 - Skills and interests
 - Team preferences (solo or team sign-up)
 - Accessibility or accommodation needs including food allergies
- If your event space has a max capacity, set the registration limit 25% higher, knowing that some people won't show and have a waitlist

9. Post-Event Follow-Up

- Thank volunteers and participants
- Share outcomes or winning ideas through a blogpost or newsletter
- Debrief with your team to capture lessons learned and how you can incorporate the hackathon results into your work
- Consider publishing a recap or summary report

Templates

Included Printable Templates

- ☐ Volunteer Roles & Responsibilities
- ☐ Run-of-Show
- ☐ Judge Scorecard
- ☐ Setup & Cleanup Checklists

Questions? performance@seattle.gov

Designed by the City of Seattle's Innovation & Performance Team

Learn more about Innovation & Performance at www.seattle.gov/innovation-and-performance.

Volunteer Roles & Responsibilities:

Below are some typical volunteer roles & responsibilities that will help make your hackathon a success! You'll need volunteers to assist with setup, registration and team matching, judging support, team mentoring, food setup, and post-event cleanup and trash checks.

Event Coordinator (1 Volunteer)

Support the smooth execution of the event by managing logistics, coordinating volunteers, and serving as the main point of contact for vendors, venue staff, and organizers. The coordinator ensures everything runs on schedule from inception to completion and helps troubleshoot any issues that arise throughout the planning process and the day of the event.

- Plan to arrive 60 minutes before doors open
- Check in with setup team, A/V, and registration volunteers
- See event run-of-show and checklist

Emcee (1 Volunteer)

Create an engaging and inclusive atmosphere by welcoming participants, introducing speakers, and guiding the audience through the event agenda. The emcee keeps energy levels high, makes key announcements, and ensures smooth transitions between sessions.

- Plan to arrive 60 minutes before doors open
- Coordinate with the event coordinator and A/V team
- See speaking points and run of show for timing

Setup (3 Volunteers)

Help create a welcoming environment by setting up tables, chairs, signage, and event materials before participants arrive. These volunteers make sure everything is organized and ready to go, including A/V and microphones.

- Plan to arrive 60 minutes before doors open
- The event coordinator can provide day-of instructions and guidance
- See setup checklist (template below)

Registration (4 Volunteers)

Welcome participants as they arrive, check them in, and help match individuals into teams. They'll be the first friendly face attendees meet!

- Plan to arrive 60 minutes before doors open (4:00 PM)
- The registration coordinator can provide day-of instructions and guidance
- Use a registration app like Luma for check in
- Using templates, document team names, team number, and members for the judging coordinator
- Match individuals to teams. We recommend 3-5 people per team with a mix of subject matter experts, designers, data scientists, analysts, and developers

Mentor (Unlimited Volunteers)

Circulate among teams during the event to see if they need guidance or feedback. Offer help with technical, design, or domain-specific questions, and encourage collaboration and problem-solving.

- These volunteers do not need to be a technical or domain expert, but your knowledge or experience will be helpful.

Judging Support (2 Volunteers)

Assist the judging panel by managing timing, collecting scorecards, and guiding teams to their presentation areas. They'll help keep the judging process smooth and on schedule.

- Judges meeting at about an hour before judging happens for coordination plan and alignment
- Keep judges on track even though time is short and they will have limited context

Food Setup (2 Volunteers)

Coordinate food and beverage setup, keep snacks stocked, and ensure meal areas stay tidy. Perfect for someone who likes to keep things running seamlessly behind the scenes.

- Food should be set up by the time the event kicks off, but can be earlier
- Have a food plan organized in advance

Cleanup (4-5 Volunteers)

Help pack up event materials, take down signage, and restore the venue to its original condition. A key role for wrapping up the event smoothly and efficiently.

- See closing the closing checklist template
- Cleanup may take up to an hour after the event ends, depending on how messy it is and how many volunteers there are

Trash Check (1-2 Volunteers)

Monitor trash and recycling stations throughout the event to keep the space clean and sustainable. Great for someone who notices details and cares about presentation.

- Be aware of your event spaces protocols on clean-up and whether you need to dispose of trash and recycling in outside receptacles or if the space has regular custodial support
- Whenever possible, leave the space better than how you found it

Run-of-Show Template

***It's helpful to print this out day of!**

Day of Roles & Contact Information

- Event Coordinator:
- Set up Lead:
- Registration Lead:
- Tear down Lead:
- Emcee:
- Presenters:
- Judging Coordinator:

Sample Schedule

Itinerary Overview

[00:00 pm] Setup

[00:00 pm] Doors Open and Registration

[00:00 pm] Welcome Opening Remarks

[00:00 pm] Presentation & Challenge Overview

[00:00 pm] Demo

[00:00 pm] Working Time

[00:00 pm] Judges Meeting

[00:00 pm] Judging presentations

[00:00 pm] Final presentations

[00:00 pm] Award & closing remarks

[00:00 pm] Clean-up

Sample Detailed Run-of-Show

4:00-5:00 pm Set up

- Set up for hackathon in the [location in venue]
- Set up begins, as led by [volunteer name]

Set up process (examples of what Seattle considers):

- Food on a countertop, drinks in a fridge
- Room layout: tables in back, 3 rows of chairs in front
- Tech Check for audio & display
- Tech Check for rooms
- Hang up signs for rooms

Set up materials:

- Wagon & Snacks
- 3-4 signs
- Tape
- Laptop (have 3 laptops ready with everything just in case)
- Slide Deck: [link]
- (Optional) Clicker

5:00 pm Check-In (doors open 4:45)

- Check-in attendees for Hackathon in the [specify location]

5:00 pm: Check in begins, as led by [volunteer name]

- Additional roles/tabling: tabled by [volunteer names]

Check in process:

- There will be 3 separate check-in lines: one for completely formed teams (Line 1), one for partially formed teams (Line 2), and one for solos (Line 3)
- Each line will have an iPad or computer to check folks in via Luma as well as printed forms to fill out team information. Someone from IP will be at each iPad to support.
- The line for partially formed teams (Line 2) and the line for solos (Line 3) should sit next to each other. As partially formed teams note how many people are needed for their team, they will be paired with solo folks checking in on the spot. We will have any unmatched partially formed teams and solo folks stand to the side, if needed, until we get them a full team.
- All completed teams will fill out the document indicated (pre-numbered) that indicates who is on their team and a team name if already identified, and each attendee will take a name tag with the assigned team number.
- Attendees will write their names on the pre-numbered name tag as it connects to their team number.

For example:

Line 2 (a partial team) checks in with 3 folks. The volunteer checking in on line 2 will communicate with the other volunteer in line 3, filling out their names and team names in team #4. The next 2 people who are solo (in line 3) will then be paired to complete the team. The team will then fill out a paper form indicating the team's name and information. Each person will fill out a name tag on the name tags numbered "4". Each team should get a paper copy of the Instructions (the PowerPoint presentation).

Tips to Consider:

- If technology or online check-in is not working, names can be checked in later with team formations.
- As capacity allows, ask attendees their background as they check in so teams can be diverse on skillsets.

Check in materials: (Keep in one bag)

- 2-3 Tables with tablecloths
- 3-4 Signs of Event
- Tape
- 3-4 Tablets
- 2-3 Chargers
- Pens
- Sharpies
- Hand Sanitizer
- Name Tags for attendees
- Name Tags for judges
- Sign in Sheets [see team formation template]
- Printed Slide Deck as Handouts [link]

5:30-6pm: Introduction

[Link to Slide Deck]

- Welcome and Overview (4 min): [presenter name]
- Subject context overview (4 min): [presenter name]
- Overview of technical Challenge, Data & Judging Criteria (8 min): [presenter name]
- Transition to tools (e.g. AI) (2 min): [presenter name]
- Demo of tools (if any) (10- min): [presenter name]

6:00-7:55pm: Hacking time!

Attendees will be in their groups working and helping themselves to snacks and lunch, as questions arise, mentors and judging consultants will be available depending on the question.

7:55-8:45pm: Presentation/Judging

Attendees will submit and present their work, as emceed by [presenter name].

The final process for judging will be determined as we confirm how many teams exist.

- Judging coordinator: **[volunteer name]**
- Pre-judging meeting with all judges and mentors at 7:00
- 7:55pm: Submissions due

Judging process:

- Judging teams will be assigned numbers indicating which teams to judge (1-5, 6-10, 11-15). Each team has 3 minutes (2 minutes to present, 1 minute for questions, and 1 minute for transition).
- Teams will go to one of three assigned rooms for presentation
- Each judge will use a score card while watching live presentations. At the end of reviewing assigned presentations, the judge teams will pick their top presenting team to move to a final round of presentations. Discussion amongst judging team may be needed in case of equal scores.

8:20pm: judges announce final 3 presenters, who will have 2 minutes for each presentation (3 to present and 1 to transition)

- Judges will individually score presentations and discuss as a group the top
- Judging coordinators will (quickly) tally up the scores.

8:30pm: presentations and announcing prizes

Judging Materials:

- Score Sheets (at least 2 per judge)
- Pens
- Name Tags
- 1 clipboard per judge
- Prizes for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place

8:45-9:30pm: Clean Up

- Thank people, send them on their way, as led by [volunteer name]
- Clean up and pack up all materials as led by [volunteer name]
 - **Room layout:** return room to original set up and close
 - **Tip:** take a photo at the beginning of the event so you know where everything goes!
 - All trash in cans and recycle any loose papers

Notes

- Times are provided in the example has worked well for us in the past
- This might need to fluctuate based on the number of attendees
- The judging coordinator will need to distribute the teams and rooms based on how many attendees show and what your space allows

Judge Scorecard

Challenge:

Judge Name:

Note: Criteria can be changed based on the hackathon goals.

Criteria	Team # Score/10pts	Team # Score/10pts	Team # Score/10pts
Innovative, Responsible Use of AI Are your AI approaches innovative, equitable, and responsible?			
Clarity & Reviewability How well do we, as the judges, understand what you've created? Have you considered your audience for this purpose?			
Creativity & Originality Are you considering new ideas or approaches?			
Feasibility How practical is your idea? How realistic is implementation?			
Impact How well does your agent solve the problem? Does it address or identify equity issues?			
Repeatability Can your approach be repeated and integrated into a broader tool?			

Set-Up & Clean-Up Checklists

4-Weeks Prior to the Event

Tasks	Volunteer Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Identify event space	
<input type="checkbox"/> Check out different spaces	
<input type="checkbox"/> Reserve the space	
<input type="checkbox"/> Reach out to potential sponsors and/or partners	
<input type="checkbox"/> Create materials	
<input type="checkbox"/> Event Flier	
<input type="checkbox"/> Presentation: context, instructions, data, etc.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Event signs	
<input type="checkbox"/> Sign-in sheets	
<input type="checkbox"/> Talking points	
<input type="checkbox"/> Signs	
<input type="checkbox"/> Update checklists to meet your hackathons needs	

Tasks	Volunteer Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Recruit Participants	
<input type="checkbox"/> Create a registration page (e.g. Luma, Eventbrite)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Send emails to universities, student groups, professionals, colleagues, etc.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Canvas university campuses, cafes, and other community spaces with fliers	
<input type="checkbox"/> Recruit Judges	
<input type="checkbox"/> Identify and reach out to judges	
<input type="checkbox"/> Find Catering	
<input type="checkbox"/> Place food order	

Day Before Event

Tasks	Volunteer Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Print out Materials (1 Volunteer)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Presentation: Instructions (20 Copies)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Presentation: Event Signs (3 copies)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Sign-in Sheets (5 Copies)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Talking Points (5 Copies)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Signs (10 Copies)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pack up Materials (1 Volunteer)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Wagon to hold everything	
<input type="checkbox"/> Tote Bags to hold everything (2 totes)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Name Tags	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pens	
<input type="checkbox"/> Sharpies	
<input type="checkbox"/> Hand Sanitizer	
<input type="checkbox"/> Snacks/Drinks	
<input type="checkbox"/> Clipboards (6 total)	
<input type="checkbox"/> I-Pads for check in (3-4 tablets)	

Tasks	Volunteer Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Chargers for I-pads (3-4 chargers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Charger for Laptop (1 charger)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Folders for Printed Materials (6 folders)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Printed Materials	
<input type="checkbox"/> Tape	
<input type="checkbox"/> (Optional) Clicker	

Day of Event - Set-Up

Tasks	Volunteer Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Shuttle Materials to Venue/Unload Car (2 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Post Signage (1 Volunteer)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Set-Up Registration Tables (4 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> 3 tables (Team, Partial Team, No Team)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Computer set-up with Luma	
<input type="checkbox"/> Paper printouts for team assignments	
<input type="checkbox"/> Set-Up Room (4 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Set up 2-3 rows chairs in front of room	
<input type="checkbox"/> Set up 2-3 rows tables in back (with chairs)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Set up laptops & presentation	
<input type="checkbox"/> Tech Check (Audio & Display)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Receive Food Order/Step-Up Food (1 Volunteer)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Post Signage	
<input type="checkbox"/> Display Food on multiple tables	
<input type="checkbox"/> Store Receipts (if needed)	

Day of Event - During Event

Tasks	Volunteer Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Mentor Participants (4 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Judging Support (3 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Take photos (2 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Opening Presentations	
<input type="checkbox"/> Hacking time, judging, and final presentations	
<input type="checkbox"/> Judging	
<input type="checkbox"/> Presentations (video if available)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Save photos in proper location	
<input type="checkbox"/> Proactive Cleaning in Main Room, Working Rooms, Trash Bins, etc. (2 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Tidy Main Room	
<input type="checkbox"/> Collect loose trash and recycle	
<input type="checkbox"/> Clean up any spills	
<input type="checkbox"/> Tidy Working Rooms	
<input type="checkbox"/> Collect loose trash and recycle	
<input type="checkbox"/> Clean up any spills	
<input type="checkbox"/> Put chairs back in the main room (if taken)	

Tasks	Volunteer Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Tidy Bathroom	
<input type="checkbox"/> Collect loose trash	
<input type="checkbox"/> Clean up any spills	
<input type="checkbox"/> Restock supplies if needed	
<input type="checkbox"/> Wipe down sink	
<input type="checkbox"/> Air out room	
<input type="checkbox"/> Food Clean up	
<input type="checkbox"/> Restock Food and snacks	
<input type="checkbox"/> Throw out old food or empty containers	
<input type="checkbox"/> Collect ALL loose trash	
<input type="checkbox"/> Take out trash to dumpsters	
<input type="checkbox"/> Take out recycle to dumpsters	

Day of Event - After Event

Tasks	Volunteer Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Reset Space (2 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Reset tables and chairs	
<input type="checkbox"/> Fold tablecloths, leave on table (if any)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Collect garbage and recycle	
<input type="checkbox"/> Remove signs from entryway doors	
<input type="checkbox"/> Double check for any left behind chargers, tech, materials	
<input type="checkbox"/> Reset Tech – turn off equipment, wrap cords, put back in original place, make sure it's charging if needed	
<input type="checkbox"/> Clean Bathrooms (1 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Restock supplies if needed; communicate if supplies are empty	
<input type="checkbox"/> Clean up any spills	
<input type="checkbox"/> Wipe down sinks	
<input type="checkbox"/> Collect loose trash and recycle	

Tasks	Volunteer Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Collect ALL Trash (2 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Collect Recycle	
<input type="checkbox"/> Collect leftover cups/plates/napkins	
<input type="checkbox"/> Take out all bags of recycling and trash to dumpsters	
<input type="checkbox"/> Clean & Pack up Food (2 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pack up remaining food and drinks	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pack up remaining snacks	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pack up and put away leftover cups/plates/napkins	
<input type="checkbox"/> Put bowls or platters away	
<input type="checkbox"/> Throw out old food/empty containers	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pack up Materials (2 Volunteers)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Load Car	
<input type="checkbox"/> Return Materials to the Office (can be done on a different day)	