

Data Trends



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The 48 hour entrepreneur

It used to be that someone would come up with a good idea and then spend many years, if not a lifetime, trying to commercialise it or to get attention for it. It was a lonely affair and in many ways it seemed that you needed more than just a great idea, you also needed a lot of luck if your idea or invention was to ever see the light of day.

It seems that sometime in the past 10 years someone came up with the ultimate great idea. That idea was to try and create great ideas on a larger scale. Like an idea farm or invention collective of sorts.

A few months ago I attended one of these idea farms, called a 'hackathon', in New Zealand. While at first I was sceptical, I was quickly converted to a believer.

A hackathon is essentially an organised event where programmers meet to do collaborative computer programming. The events are not restricted to just programmers. Anyone who wants to pay the fee and has an interest can show up, and in many cases the events are free.

Sometimes the group that shows up (often numbered in the hundreds) is presented with a problem or series of problems. The attendees break into groups and are given the duration of the hackathon to try and solve the problem. At the end of the session each team presents its proposed solution, often with a mock up to demonstrate how the solution would work. After all possible solutions are presented, the owner of the problem chooses the team they feel could best help them solve the problem based on what was developed. There is usually


a prize or, in many cases, just a commitment to use the team to try and commercialise the solution.

These events are often held over a weekend, and are conducted on this basis because the people who attend often have day jobs or are students. The weekend is used to try and short circuit what would previously have been a lifetime battle to find a problem and innovatively solve it in a commercial setting, i.e. become an entrepreneur. The recipe for this is simple; (problem + technology + sleep deprivation) ÷ team = innovation.

On Friday you work at the local supermarket, on Monday you return to your job to tell your boss to stick it because you are an entrepreneur. I love it, and we are seeing it work all over the world. In fact many companies hold internal hackathons with their employees to present a series of problems and allow their employees to think freely in a

compressed timeframe in order to come up with solutions. Everyone is free to contribute and the ideas that flow from these open sessions can come from anywhere in the company. A receptionist can design a new way to keep sales people informed about client visits, or a sales person can come up with a new way for the receptionist to track client visits. You just never know who will come up with the next great idea.

In today's depressed market, with unemployment in our key field of geophysics running at an all-time high, we are seeing extremely smart people sitting on the side lines waiting for things to improve. If you fit this bill, then I implore you to seek out these hackathon events and put your mind to work. I would wager that in most hackathons physicists are poorly represented, but the value that we could bring from our studies and experience of complex problems could be immense.




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