Hackathons in Web3:
An opportunity for recruiting a more inclusive builder community
Hackathon in Web3
An opportunity for recruiting a more inclusive builder community

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Direct link to this report:
https://cradl.org/hackathons-in-web3
**Reviewers:**
Ellis Norman, VP of Sales at HackerEarth

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**Report Design:** Justin Tanhui

**Photography:**
Kept anonymous at request of the photographer.

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The Crypto Research and Design Lab (CRADL)’s vision is to champion a humanity-centric Web3 for everyone. Our mission is to clear a path for an equitable Web3 where people and communities are at its center.

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Our primary goal is impact. We encourage readers to share, iterate on, and apply our research findings.

All of our reports are available as Google Slides and PDFs so that you can easily copy and paste content from the slide deck into your materials. Be sure to attribute CRADL as the source.

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1 Context
2 What We Did
3 What We Learned
4 Key Takeaways
5 Next Steps
What do Hackathons look like in crypto?
Hackathon in Web3

Section 1: Context

Hackathons are a major phenomenon in tech and Web3
In crypto, they are where many product ideas are born, developers learn about chains, and Web3 norms are set. Gitcoin - is a virtual community of 312,000 monthly active developers enabled by a DAO - helps match developers with projects in Web3. Even as a new player in the space, they have hosted 91 Hackathons since 2019, ~30 per year.

Money is going towards Hackathons
A combined $8.5M in prizes are being awarded to 28 DevPost Hackathons tagged with “blockchain” in 2022 alone. DevPost is one of the largest (but one of many) producers of Hackathons.

Many crypto orgs (including CRADL) run Hackathons
We ourselves are designing the Consensus 2022 hackathon in collaboration with Coin Desk and HackerEarth. Understanding our audience (hackathon attendees, current and prospective) and the context of use (Hackathons) is key to informing what and how we make. Our aim is to ensure each part of our hackathon, from the registration process to the final awards, aligns with our mission of putting people at the center of crypto.
We sought diverse perspectives from a variety of new and seasoned hackathon attendees and organizers:

**Ellis Norman**, VP of Sales at **HackerEarth**, a platform that enables virtual Hackathons.

**Software Engineer & Product Leader** with 15 years of industry experience in tech (including leading product for a crypto company).

**Software Engineer with 3.5 years of industry experience**, has attended Hackathons on behalf of a sponsor and as an attendee.

**The founder of an early stage startup that is raising their first round**, who had attended several Hackathons and just organized their first, seeking talent for their team.

**Tracey Bowen & Yip (Thy-Diep Ta)**, Co-founders of **H.E.R. DAO**, a womxn-focused developer DAO, championing the mission of radical inclusion and equitable futures in the Web3 space.

**A college senior majoring in applied math and computer science**, attending his first hackathon to learn about blockchain.

**The founder of a non-profit with 4 years of industry experience**, attending his 20th hackathon.
Insights

1. Not everyone goes to hackathons to win
   People go to hackathons because they want to meet people and learn things, but a lot of the resources hackathons provide are about how to get a submission done and maybe even win.

2. Friends join teams, strangers join projects
   Hackathons incentivize quick thinking, team formation and norming around an idea. This does not leave much room for diverse and divergent perspectives.

3. Hackathons are designed experiences...even when they're not
   The “default” version of a hackathon sends clear signals about who it is for, and variations from the norm can significantly change the experience.
What are we here to answer?

Business Question:
What makes a hackathon successful?

Reframed Human-Centric Question:
Why do developers go to hackathons?
How we acquired the data

**Desk Research**
We reviewed existing literature on hackathons, including academic papers and industry reports. We evaluated the messaging and promotion of past, active, and upcoming Hackathons.

**43 interviews**
We interviewed hackathon attendees and organizers to better understand the hackathon experience from both sides.

**2+ days of observation at in-person hackathons**
We attended a small number of hackathons in across the US to see the dynamics of hackathons in action. We contextually interviewed additional organizers, attendees, and sponsors at these events.

**20 hours of participation at a virtual hackathons**
We participated in hackathons which took place through virtual platforms like Discord. We worked with multiple teams on their submissions and observed the team dynamics. We even won a bounty.
1 Context
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Insight 1

Not everyone goes to hackathons to win.
Motivations vary for attending hackathons

Personal factors such as life stage, current job, and home situation, as well as hackathon-specific factors including how it is marketed, where it is located, when it takes place, and the subject matter all contribute to peoples’ decisions of whether or not to attend.

Despite these variations in motivations, most hackathon content is geared specifically towards helping attendees win.

The project submission is a means for attendees to achieve their goals, not necessarily an end in itself.

Why some of our interviewees attend hackathons:

Learn about the tech broadly
“I want to learn about blockchain”

Learn specific skills
“I want to write a smart contract”

Meet people they might be able to hire
“I’m looking for people to help work on my project”

Meet potential employers or invest in their project
“I’m looking for a job”

Meet people with shared values
“I really believe in the vision of DeFi and wanted to meet other people who are interested in that sort of stuff”
“I wasn’t planning to win, I just wanted to write a smart contract.”

Quoted from a recent college graduate who majored in computer science. He was also a finalist at a hackathon we attended.

He had attended the hackathon as part of a team organized by a friend prior. He ultimately decided to work on his own, wanting heads down time to write a smart contract. He has a full-time job lined up upon graduation, and didn’t plan to develop a project he’d work on long-term. He ended up winning this hackathon.

“[We came] to learn about blockchain.”

Quoted from a team of students from an international exchange program at their college. They were one of the finalists at a hackathon we attended.

We spoke with this team just after they and other finalists pitched their projects to the judges. They weren’t expecting to win, and they didn’t plan to continue working on the project after the hackathon. They also shared that they were strategic about prioritizing their time to get something built and submitted.
Jim is from New Zealand, where he is building a Web3 company. His company creates decentralized, free wifi to eliminate internet poverty in urban areas and help get the next 2.9 billion people online.

On the first day of the hackathon, Jim pitched his project to everyone who didn’t already have a team. We spoke with him during breakfast on the last day of the hackathon to learn more.

Jim flew from New Zealand to attend the hackathon in search of people to work with him. While his education is in web design, he transitioned into sales early in his career. Finding software engineers familiar with blockchain was what prevented him from pushing his project forward in New Zealand. He said that managing software engineers is much like managing any other team, and he would happily hire any of the guys he met to work remotely if he raised money. Jim’s team was not selected as finalists, but he has continued to work on this project since the hackathon.
How can you tell if a hackathon is worth attending?

“The challenge, the sponsors, and the prizes.”

Antonio Mendieta is the founder of a Comida for Familias, a non-profit which builds software projects that are all focused on social impact. He is a seasoned hackathon attendee who has attended at least 20 hackathons.

Antonio brought a volunteer from Comida for Familias to be part of his team, and pitched two ideas at the beginning of the hackathon to recruit more people.

We spoke with Antonio at dinner on the first day of the hackathon. He initially recruited one new person, and ended up with 3 recruits for his team by the final day. His team was not one of the finalists. When asked why he thought his team wasn’t selected, he said, “sometimes, it’s really about how you pitch your product that wins hackathons”
Insight 2

Friends join teams, strangers join projects.
The composition of a team directly influences the ideas brought to hackathons.

Team formation is a crucial part of the hackathon experience. Hackathons are built around teams, and the composition of those teams varies based on when and how they form. The team determines which projects that are pursued, and the quality of those projects.

There are many factors which make teams different from one-another, a few of which have been listed here.

**The factors that differentiate teams:**

- **Size**
  How many people are in the team?

- **Familiarity**
  How long have the people on the team known each other?

- **Idea progress**
  How well developed are the idea(s) team members are bringing to the table?

- **Skill sets**
  What are the competencies of the people on the team?

- **Availability**
  How much time do the team members plan on contributing to the hackathon?

- **Motivations**
  What is each team member hoping to get out of a hackathon?
Insight 2: Friends join teams, strangers join projects.

We’ve identified five team archetypes:  
These do not represent all hackathon teams, however cover most of what we observed in our research. They highlight the challenges that come with building a working product in 3 days, and how team composition influences the approach to overcoming those challenges.

1. **Mavericks**
   Solo “teams” who know what they want

2. **Buddies**
   Friends and/or colleagues from experiences before the hackathon

3. **In-Mavs**
   Involuntary mavericks who pitched an idea, but couldn’t get anybody to join their team

4. **Founder + Recruits**
   Someone with an idea who convinces people without ideas to join their team

5. **Clustered Founders**
   Strangers who have similar ideas and find each other while looking for other people to join their team
Team Archetype:

1. Mavericks

“I want to do it myself.”

Mavericks are teams of one. Because they don’t have to run decisions by other team members, they are supremely agile. In order to see if they’re on the right track, they are forced to look outside of their team for validation of their ideas and for help. However, their project quality is limited by their prior expertise, the quality of the resources available at the hackathon, and their ability to utilize those resources.

There were 5 finalists who won prizes at in person hackathon. 2 of the 5 were Mavericks.

Insight 2
Friends join teams, strangers join projects.

“I wanted to build something cool and meet people”
- Math major at his first hackathon

“Just wanted to learn to write a smart contract, I knew this hackathon would force me to do it”
- Recent Computer Science Grad at his first hackathon
Team Archetype: 2. Buddies

“We want to do it together.”

Buddies’ teams form before the hackathon. All the members of the team are at the hackathon for the same reason. They do not look for new team members to join them.

These teams are more likely to be impacted by proximity bias because they are formed based on the existing network of the team members. Buddies’ shared experiences give them similar values and/or approaches to solving problems, enabling quick decision-making. This improved efficiency does come with a cost -- they are less inclined to meet with other attendees or solicit outside help.

There were 5 finalists who won prizes at one in-person hackathon. 3 of the 5 were Buddies.
3. In-Mav

“I wish someone else would work with me.”

In-Mavs (short for involuntary mavericks) have an idea in mind and are looking for other team members, but are unable to find them. This can happen for a variety of reasons. Maybe they lack the salesmanship or social skills to convince others to join. Maybe there is nobody at the hackathon with overlapping interests. Maybe they missed the session where they were supposed to pitch their idea. Often In-Mavs lack the full skill set required to complete a submission solo. Upon their recruitment efforts bearing no fruit, they are sometimes discouraged and unmotivated to take advantage of the resources at the hackathons.

In-Mavs often submit incomplete projects and hope for the best. They are unlikely to continue to pursue their project after the hackathon.
Team archetype

4. Founder + Recruits

**Founder:** “I’m looking for other people to help me work on my project.”

**Recruits:** “I want to learn.”

Recruits come to hackathons hoping to learn. They may have broad interests and some loose ideas, but haven’t committed to them.

Unlike Buddies, Founders + Recruits don’t share the same goals, but their goals are aligned and mutually beneficial. While these teams tend to be more diverse in expertise and experience, they do not naturally create environments in which recruits’ perspectives can meaningfully change the direction of the project. The core idea for the product/project is already locked in. We did not observe any teams of this kind win any bounties. The Founders often continue working on some form of the project after the event. They may or may not hire some of their recruits to further their work.

“In [my home country], I couldn’t find anyone who was interested in blockchain to work with.”

- Attendee at the in person hackathon with an idea looking for new team mates

“I want to meet other people who are interested in blockchain and build something.”

- Experienced web developer looking to break into web3 at the in person hackathon
Section 3: What We Learned

Team Archetype:

5. Clustered Founders

“I’m looking for other people to help me work on my project too! I wonder whose project we’ll pursue…”

Clustered Founders form when there are one or more Founders looking to recruit a team. Typically these Founders will have similar, well-developed ideas. They hope that their similar idea will allow them to build something that is greater than the sum of its parts. What typically happens is that they default to the idea that is more developed, or the idea of the team member who dedicates more time during the hackathon. The final output is often a frankenstein version of the two ideas, disjointed due to lack of full commitment from one team member to the others’ concept.

Insight 2
Friends join teams, strangers join projects.

“I think we have some overlap in interests... This is one of my main projects right now. ... Perhaps we should form a team?”
- Web3 novice looking for people to work on the DAO they founded

“[The rest of the team] and I had a conversation earlier today where we are pivoting to lead with the concept I’ve been building this past year.”
- Founder who is looking to tokenize a community she’s been curating
Hackathon-facilitated team matching is centered around attendees pitching ideas.

Typical team-finding exercises at hackathons involve people who have ideas pitching and people who don’t have ideas joining those teams. Specifically, there is a point in time when those with existing project ideas will pitch them. These pitchers may even have an existing team, but are happy to invite more people to do the work.

TOP RIGHT: Example of a post in a #find-a-team channel on Discord where a founder is looking to recruit people to join her project.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Example of someone on DevPost describing their skills, and that they are looking to join a project.

Insight 2: Friends join teams, strangers join projects.

*Howdy you all, [julesrules](https://twitter.com/julesrules) and I are working on a web3 product studio/incubator for web3 products with the purpose of wellness. The first product we want to build is something to do with the vibe within a DAO - either a tokenized game for newbies who are onboarding (that they have to make a vibe check to align the mission / values of the DAO) or a vibe check bot within a DAO discord. If you are interested in joining us for the hackathon feel free to drop me a dm. 🌸 Oh yea and feel free to check out our light paper here: [https://collectivewellness.notion.site/collectivewellness/About-Collective-Wellness-47eeb2b3731549299f5ca208408bd3a](https://collectivewellness.notion.site/collectivewellness/About-Collective-Wellness-47eeb2b3731549299f5ca208408bd3a).*
Conventional team formation doesn’t facilitate diverse perspectives in forming a solution.

Typical team formation, as outlined in prior pages, is expedient and efficient. It requires little effort from organizers, and most people who want to be on teams seem to end up on teams!

That said, teams of strangers typically form around an existing idea pitched by a charismatic leader. This prevents diverse perspectives from being represented in the “idea formation” phase of hackathons.

Alternative “team-finding” could focus on diversity of expertise, experience, cultural competence or a variety of other factors.
Insight 3

Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.
Insight 3  Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.

“We used Devpost because we know about Devpost.”
Hackathon organizers look to their own experience to make decisions about how to design their hackathons. Repeating certain hackathon “elements” allows organizers to operate quickly and reduces decision fatigue.

Hackathon defaults clearly signal who the hackathon is for and what they’re expected to do.
Despite these decisions not always being deliberate, the “default” tools and practices of hackathons reach and support inclusion of specific audiences. Touchpoints are not neutral, from food choices (default being pizza and beer) to the platforms used to promote and organize the event.

Hackathon touchpoints aren’t all deliberately designed, but all of them send signals.
Insight 3: Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.

Hackathon “values” are signaled through multiple touchpoints in the attendee’s experience outlined below:
Insight 3: Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they're not.

Case Study: In-Person Hackathon

One in-person hackathon used conventional hackathon language to continually reinforce that it was primarily focused on deploying code and building investable products.

CONSUME CONTENT & RESOURCES

Kick-Off Presentation
“We want you to ship something”

Programming
- First presentation after the keynote was a technical rundown of developer toolkits (SDKs)
- Second day programming featured a panel with investors, highlighting what they would look for in winning submissions

SUBMISSIONS & JUDGING

Submission Requirements Include:
- Demo Video of working code
- Written description of the project, why the participant built it, the tech stack, the lessons learned, and next steps
- URL to github repo

Judges
Judges were all people in tech, either investors or leadership at other tech companies.

Winners Announced
The top 5 teams were ranked, and those that won had the highest fidelity demos

Register / Sign up
Registration was through DevPost which asked for specialty, and listed various software engineering specialties as the defaults. (as seen on slide 33)

Using DevPost and having registration ask about engineering specialties signals that this event is primarily for software engineers. While ~half of the people who registered for the event came from a non-developer event hosting site, mostly devs showed up at the event on the day of.

Learn About the Hackathon
- Promoted at blockchain meetups
- Shared through word of mouth in virtual blockchain spaces like Discords
- The Event was tagged as “developer” “computer_science” on the platform hosting the event
- Promoted on a non-developer event hosting site, but drove traffic to devpost.

Find a Team
Teams sign up OR were formed in manners described earlier in this report.

Work on Idea
- Work happened primarily in-person at the event
- In-person office hours were available to help troubleshoot technical issues, but minimal guidance provided for the non-technical components of the work.

Technical resources assume a basic understanding of computer science and software engineering. The expectation is that your computer is set up with a development environment. This reinforces that this event is not for inexperienced or non-technical people.
Insight 3: Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they're not.

Case Study: Virtual Hackathon

One Virtual hackathon was for non-technical people who aspired to build a community in web3 using low-code solutions. While this was signaled by providing beginner-friendly resources, judges and mentors with expertise in the subject matter, the venue of Discord and purely virtual format required a degree of technical literacy and resulted in a clunky experience for a non-technical crowd.

Learn About the Hackathon
Promoted through Twitter and via word of mouth in other communities.

Find a Team
Attendees with ideas pitched in #find-a-team channel in Discord and attendees without those ideas joined those teams.

Even joining a team requires an understanding of Discord and hackathon etiquette, for example which channels to post in for what, appropriate length or messages, and what to say in order to find a team. This can be daunting for someone new to Discord.

Work on Idea
- Work happened primarily in-person at the event
- In-person office hours were available to help troubleshoot technical issues, but minimal guidance provided for the non-technical components of the work.

CONSUME CONTENT & RESOURCES

Resources Available
- 4.5 hours of reading for novices in the space to get their arms around the subject matter
- Programming Panels with other people who had built web3 communities

While providing beginner level resources signals that anyone with any level of knowledge can participate, 4.5 hours of reading is a significant time commitment for someone joining a three-day hackathon. This can make the subject matter seem inaccessible.

SUBMISSIONS & JUDGING

Submission Requirements Include:
- A 3-5 minute video of a pitch deck
- A google doc explaining the vision and strategy of the project
- Did not require a technical component

Judges
Judges were all people in tech, either investors or leadership at other tech companies.

Winners Announced
Winners were announced on Twitter a week after the hackathon ended, and project submissions were not made public. Winners were contacted directly on Discord.

Register / Sign up
Registration was through a neutral survey platform, asked for Discord handle, pronouns, ethereum address (optional) and existing experience in web3 (optional)

- Asking for a Discord handle signals an expectation of Discord literacy to participate.
- Asking for pronouns signals inclusivity by making apparent that the expectation is not that everyone there will be male
- Asking for an ethereum address signals that crypto literacy will be helpful in this hackathon, but isn’t a hard requirement
- NOT asking about development or SWE experience invites non-technical people to attend.

The submissions not requiring a technical component enabled a wider variety of participants to submit projects.

The fully virtual format left teams on their own to figure out how to coordinate digitally.

Even though the event was clearly open to (and in many ways designed for) novices, the lack of guidelines made it difficult to know if you were "on track". As a result, the submission deadline ended up being extended by 3 days.

While providing beginner level resources signals that anyone with any level of knowledge can participate, 4.5 hours of reading is a significant time commitment for someone joining a three-day hackathon. This can make the subject matter seem inaccessible.

Even joining a team requires an understanding of Discord and hackathon etiquette, for example which channels to post in for what, appropriate length or messages, and what to say in order to find a team. This can be daunting for someone new to Discord.

One Virtual hackathon was for non-technical people who aspired to build a community in web3 using low-code solutions. While this was signaled by providing beginner-friendly resources, judges and mentors with expertise in the subject matter, the venue of Discord and purely virtual format required a degree of technical literacy and resulted in a clunky experience for a non-technical crowd.
Lack of clarity makes attendees feel “lost”

Hackathon n00bs need support
Those new to hackathons may not know how to participate, which can lead to feelings of exclusion. This can pose specific challenges to organizers aiming to broaden the diversity of attendees. An example of this is use of Discord to disseminate event information, when Discord itself presents onboarding and use challenges to those unfamiliar.

Vague Submission Requirements
Themes and judging criteria are often so high-level and broadly-scoped that attendees feel left in the dark.

After the winners were announced, developers at one hackathon shared that they wanted clearer submission requirements to understand what they would have had to do to win.
Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.

### It’s clear when hackathons do (and don’t) design for “social time.”

Hackathons are ultimately characterized by periods of intense building. What hackathon designers sometimes forget is that hackathons are not technology events -- they are social events with a technology component. Many hackathon participants actually attend in order to meet people.

We can look to best practices at hackathons and other social events for how to create experiences in which people are comfortable participating. This is especially important at hackathons where attendees may feel out of place due to their gender, race, skillset, or interests being the minority at a particular event.

There are three categories of touchpoints that organizers can use to facilitate socializing at hackathons. We’ve included examples of how these affordances show up in planned events.

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**Touchpoints for facilitating socializing at hackathons**

1. **The Built Environment**
   What affordances does the physical or digital venue offer to facilitate specific interactions?

2. **Programming**
   What talks or events are planned for the event? What is the content of those talks?

3. **Resources**
   What documents or resources are attendees provided with? What mentors are available?
The Built Environment

This in-person hackathon space featured tables of different sizes and orientations to support different types of working.

Communal spaces like the kitchen afford casual interaction. Four-person booths enable small concentrated conversations. Bar stools facing windows allow individuals to have heads down time.
One of our interview participants shared this during a reflection of his experience at Cosmoverse in Lisbon, Portugal. Things in the built environment like table size can play a dramatic role in the ability for people to socialize. The cocktail tables served as natural points for people to gather around, and only allowed 3-4 people to comfortably participate in each conversation.

At the April 2022 Big Ass Social Happy Hour (BASHH), larger tables with benches led to larger conversations which made it hard for everyone to participate. The benches also made it harder for attendees to fluidly join and leave conversations.

The Built Environment

“The tables at Cosmoverse were deliberately small to keep conversations from getting too big”
Insight 3 Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.

### Programming

Some events schedule explicit networking and drinks times to encourage “heads-up” time.

LEFT: This schedule from a hackathon clearly lays out explicit social time for participants to connect with one another. Participants were able to view this schedule when deciding whether or not to attend the hackathon.

A virtual hackathon we attended did not have built-in socializing until after ideas were submitted. This resulted in minimal interaction between teams, and most socialization happened within teams.
Insight 3 Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they're not.

Resources

Some events lay out things in detail to help prepare attendees for social time.

Providing explicit instructions for folks who are not typically in such social events removes barriers to socializing comfortably.

LEFT: Big Ass Social Happy Hour (BASHH) is a monthly tech networking event in Austin. The website features a long, narrative style “what to expect” page which talks literally step by step about what a social interaction may be like.
Insight 3 Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.

Language sets the expectations for participants’ priorities.

Attendees are exposed to dozens of touchpoints leading up to and throughout a hackathon. Each is an opportunity to signal what you as a host expect to see at that hackathon.

TOP LEFT: This screenshot is from the DevPost registration flow. I was directed to register for DevPost in order to participate in a particular hackathon. DevPost auto-selects that I’m a Full-stack developer. The placeholder text for skills suggest “languages, databases, frameworks,” etc.

While there are other options I can select in the onboarding, and the skills text box allows me to add skills like “product strategy” or “UI/UX,” these default options signal that this hackathon is for developers, or other people who write code.

BOTTOM RIGHT: These are screenshots from promotional videos for two different hackathons. The messaging clearly targets only developers.
Insight 3 Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.

The way hackathons are designed matters. Reinforced messaging throughout the participant journey influences behavior.

A member of a winning team shared this shortly after the announcement that they were finalists. Ongoing reinforcement of the importance of building is echoed in the trade-offs this team made i.e. they prioritized building over refining ideas.

How did you decide what to build?
“We had a group brainstorming session, but we set a cut-off for deciding by Friday night otherwise we knew we’d never finish our submission.”

Do you think this is a real problem?
“We have some idea, [one of the speakers] was talking about this problem, but I guess this is just our hackathon hypothesis.”
Hackathons often place emphasis on the “Build” portion of the product development cycle.

There aren’t resources provided to support the “Listen” or “Think” steps, and there isn’t time to pursue them in such a 3 day hackathon.

Framework: Product Development Cycle

One of our interview participants and CRADL advisor shared this model of product development, an iteration of IBM’s loop.
Insight 3: Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.

The way hackathons are designed matters. Reinforced messaging throughout the participant journey influences behavior.

“The quote to the right is from a conversation with Ellis, the VP of sales at HackerEarth. HackerEarth is the global leader in hackathons. They have hosted over ten thousand hackathons around the world and coordinate with developer relations managers globally.

“Blockchain [hackathon sponsors and organizers] want to see github repos, activity on servers, and communities growing. It’s all about showing activity on-chain. ‘Listen’ and ‘Think’ don’t necessarily lead to activity on chain.”
Insight 3  Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.

Does exclusively rewarding builders reinforce that only building matters?

The quote below is from a member of a winning team, who had built a product that enables customers with feature phones (i.e. non-smart phones) to access crypto using an established telecommunications and mobile money technology called USSD.

His interpretation of an expert was someone who had built something similar to him -- not someone who had used USSD or may be the end user of their project.

When hackathons reward participants for building without incorporating user or expert feedback, it reinforces the notion that you can succeed without understanding industry norms or listening to customers.

Have you considered talking to an expert about your project?

“Oh, like someone who’s built an off-ramp for USSD before?”
Hackathon in Web3

Section 3: What We Learned

**Insight 3** Hackathons are designed experiences... even when they’re not.

How can we make space for things other than building at hackathons?

If all three of these steps are important for developing great projects, how can hackathons create more space for they other two steps?
Key Takeaway No. 1

Not everybody goes to a hackathon to make your technology useful.
Key Takeaway No. 2

Diverse participants don’t necessarily lead to diverse teams.
Key Takeaway No. 3

Team composition influences participant experience and project quality.
Key Takeaway No. 4

Event and experience design determines who is (and is not) included, reinforces values, and shapes behavior - for better or for worse.
How this has informed the designing of our hackathon

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<th>Avoid</th>
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<td>- Promoting the event in non-tech or Web3 oriented communities.</td>
<td>- Rewarding building solutions that aren’t grounded in real human needs.</td>
<td>- How to support socializing in virtual hackathons.</td>
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<td>- Facilitating team finding that fosters teams with diverse members coming up with well-informed solutions.</td>
<td>- Registration processes that alienate non-developers.</td>
<td>- How to maintain engagement throughout an extended event (we plan for a longer-format hackathon at Consensus).</td>
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<td>- Providing resources that support developing a nuanced understanding of the problem being solved rather than just building.</td>
<td>- Having homogenous judging panels comprised exclusively of people in tech.</td>
<td>- What types of submission requirements enable non-technical folks to participate and collaborate with technical participants in a meaningful way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Including programming that supports attendees other goals such as learning new skills and meeting new people.</td>
<td>- Vague judging requirements and criteria that leave participants uncertain of how to show up well.</td>
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<td>- Providing guidelines for how far along teams should be by various points in the hackathon.</td>
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<td>- Deliberately designing digital spaces that enable collaboration and non-project oriented socializing.</td>
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1 Context
2 What We Did
3 What We Learned
4 Key Takeaways
5 Next Steps
Next Steps

1. **Research cross-disciplinary hackathons**
   “Default” hackathon decisions clearly send certain messages, but we’d like to better understand how Hackathons can deviate from the norm to achieve different outcomes. We especially want to understand ways to invite non-engineers to participate in Hackathons.

2. **Research the role of developer relations in the crypto ecosystem**
   It became clear this work that a major reason hackathons are held in crypto is to build communities around specific protocols. What are the financial incentives at play here? What leads to developers choosing specific chains? We’d like to investigate further.

3. **Incorporate this feedback into designing our hackathon**
   We are in the process of planning a 3-month hackathon that will take place this summer. We will incorporate these findings into the design of our event.
CRADL is a research organization committed to objectively documenting people, organizations, and activities in the crypto ecosystem and their impact on the broader industry.

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