

### **How to set up an online hackathon within 6 hours**

*and suggestions from the global community on how to do it when you have more time*

This is a short summary of how we put together the [Hack the Crisis](#) online hack together with Garage48, AccelerateEstonia, Guaana and the whole Estonian startup community. Each paragraph summarises how we did it here and the “learnings/suggestions” part is where **I kindly ask you to add comments and ideas** on how to do it differently. We want this to be a global resource on how to act quickly in a state of crisis and set up a tech community response offering solutions.

It is amazing to see the global response and many hackathons being organised to help local communities. We are doing our best to gather the events and resulting projects on a single webpage to make it easier to match similar projects and support this global community.

Please let us know if you are organising (or want to organise) a crisis hack, we want to support by:

- 1) adding your event to our **global community website** (<http://garage48.org/hackthecrisis>)
- 2) sharing **free resources**: these guidelines and [our fact sheet about the HacktheCrisis movement](#), designs if needed to set up your event in rocket speed
- 3) inviting you to the [global organisers Slack community](#) where you can ask and answer questions on the go
- 4) offering **hands-on help** with setting up your event, suggesting mentors etc.

In return, we are super grateful if you support the Hack the Crisis movement by adding our logos as supporters: [Garage48](#) and [AccelerateEstonia](#)

Please get in touch with us: join straight away the [organisers Slack group](#) and reach out to Merit - she is managing the community there - or reach out to me first via email [kai@garage48.org](mailto:kai@garage48.org).

## Virtual hackathon playbook

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### **Preparation**

#### **Lean team:**

Gather the organizers, keep the team lean, share roles. This will be very different depending on the organising people. I suggest having the following fields covered and very clear who is responsible for what. One person can of course cover more than one field and they can recruit more people to help them. Most important part is to have one responsible person and keeping the information flowing between each other.

- a) Time keeping, syncing tasks, guiding the team.
- b) Setting up and managing the hackathon flow (including managing all tools: Zoom, Slack, Gyaana etc)
- c) Gathering and managing mentors.
- d) Gathering and managing partnerships, most importantly public sector institutions and people.
- e) Managing community (starting from all social media, later managing Slack etc).
- f) Communication and PR (all mainstream media, first local, later international)

Choose the correct tools:

**Mastersheet:** Use one single resource for all the information, ask your team members to update it constantly, keep information in one place. We used a shared Google sheet with tabs like: Hackathon set-up, PR set-up, Community channels, Sponsors & prizes, Community partners.

We wrote clear to-do's under each of the tabs. (Only thing, keep pushing everyone to fill it on the go. Otherwise information gets lost.) Later we added all the team information and mentor notes to this sheet as well.

**Shared Google drive:** cannot emphasize it more, be organised from the start, remind your team to upload everything and use shared docs.

**Public Slack:** we chose Slack as the most commonly used platform for project teams, I think it worked really well. But be mindful that you might get people who haven't used it before.

**Webinars:** we chose Zoom and learnt how to set up webinars about 5 minutes before the show. I'd still recommend Zoom but if you have time look into other platforms and take a bit longer to make yourself familiar with the one you choose. You have to invest a few hundred euros here for the Zoom upgrade (pretty much the same on other platforms). If you have budget then upgrade to several hosts (that means you can run parallel sessions under the same account) and get the webinar add-on (to run video calls with several panelists).

**Team calls:** For us with very limited time, it was approx every 1h with the organizing team before the hack. During the weekend it was more ad hoc but about 3-4 stand up calls with our team kept everyone on track and in sync. We used FB messenger as our main organising chat, just because we could start group calls there immediately.

**Idea collection and evaluations:** Our friends from [Guaana](#) were champions to jump in and help us to manage it all. Their product manages idea submissions, committee evaluation process, and publishing results in one flow. We used it to gather the problem statements at the start of the hack. (We had a public form to submit your problem statement. Then the [system created a public list of submitted problem statements](#) and each problem description/idea had its own page.) And also we used it for the final results. (Each team filled in a form and uploaded a video pitch + we could add evaluators straight to the platform and later create a [public list of the finalists in ranking order.](#)) We highly appreciate Edgar Aronov who was on call the whole time to help and we highly recommend the Guaana team - Edgar, Indrek, Marko, Ain - they make magic happen!

Contact them: [edgar.aronov@guaana.com](mailto:edgar.aronov@guaana.com)

Engage as many relevant community partners/ppl as you can:

Know your community - reach out to community orgs, public sector institutions, mentors, partners. Know what to ask.

*Learnings/suggestions:*

*We didn't use a special platform for hacks. We quickly looked into them and decided against it. If someone has good recommendations, then would like to hear about it.*

**Set an agenda**

Friday, 13th of March

15:00 Idea collection starts in Guaana

15:00 Join the public Slack

18:00 Kick-off Webinar. Opening remarks by Mr. Kaimar Karu.

18:00 Idea collection closed. Register your team to solve a specific problem.

18:30 We announce the teams on Slack. Work starts.

18:30 Announcing the mentors and agenda of the hackathon

Saturday, 14th of March

10:00 Checkpoint #1

17:00 Checkpoint #2

Sunday, 15th of March

10:00 Checkpoint #3

18:00 Final Webinar - pitching of the final products

*Learnings/suggestions:*

*It's good to set yourself these milestones. We set this before everything started and pretty much followed this, just needed to figure out along the way how to technically make them happen.*

*In reality, we kept the idea submissions open bc people were joining later.*

*Also, the team members submitted initially to Typeform were changing constantly. As we were quite overwhelmed with requests, we opened a shared sheet of all the teams and gave the team lead editing rights.*

## Launch the event

### Gather participants and ideas in parallel.

Event launched on social media: design, text, agenda, rules (FB was the best channel, for us, but also used Instagram and LinkedIn)

### Advertising the event

- Use community power to get the message out - share in FB / email / LinkedIn lists of previous events/hackathons/coworking spaces/tech, creative etc FB groups
- **Engage your team and community** - ask everyone to send FB event invites to their friends
- **Use the network of Garage48:** add [Garage48](#) as a co-host to your hackathon on FB. Then we will help to spread the word about your event in our community of international techies and previous hackathon participants from across the globe.
- Engage local influencers to spread the message - politicians, industry leaders, techies, creatives...

### Problem/idea collection.

You create the first call to the ideas from the crowd. You can publish the ones you accept. The accepted ideas are on a public link for everyone to see.

The participants can see/understand what they can work on.

We used Guaana as a platform.

Problems need to come from regular people, from people who are dealing with these issues and problems in their everyday life. That's why the form needs to be simple.

### Participant collection.

We used public Slack to get all interested people in one place.

It's not about the quantity, it's the quality. So reach out also directly on email and phone.

Set up Slack:

Set the etiquette and keep on sharing instructions.

Be ready for lots of people starting to join Slack - have instructions ready, pre-make relevant channels, add participants automatically to these channels.

### *Learnings/suggestions:*

*You can try categorising the collected problems.*

*If you expect a lot of Slack newbies - get some basic guidelines on how to use slack (threads, status change, access channels etc)*

## Kicking off the hackathon

We kicked off on Friday at 18.00. We ran a 15-minute webinar with welcoming words from our IT minister Kaimar Karu. We gave short instructions to choose the problem from the public Guaana list and build a team around it. Our criterias: team lead needs to take action to find a team, the minimum number of people was 4, if you got these people together you got submitted to the hack. (In reality most of the teams were 6-7 people.)

*Learnings/suggestions:*

## Team formation

We used a separate Slack channel for team formation discussions. It was a beautiful mess that worked with participants being patient and asking/answering questions from each other. We didn't really facilitate this process, just did a few announcements when the time was running out to find yourself a team. Looking back at the thread I can say, it started with general idea discussions (how about we do that, articles and resources were shared), then team leads were posting an idea and asking who wants to join (separate channels for specific ideas were created and it seemed that the discussion was taken there), then people posting their skills and getting recruited to the separate idea channels.

*Learnings/suggestions:*

*Could try 2 separate channels: "post your idea to find skills" and "post your skills to find an idea"*

*Could try different slack channels for different roles.*

*Could try a platform with a matchmaking feature or a separate matchmaking app.*

*We (HackForce) involved core mentors at some point to help match people with potential teams, as many people got lost in the Slack channels, too much info. Calum had good advice that the moment there are more than 2 people for the team - they create a slack channel and drag potential team members there for further discussion*

## Registering teams

Our team submission went through Typeform. The team lead's goal was to get their team members together and register them on Typeform: team name, team members and contacts, problem you are solving (link to Guaana), goal for Sunday.

We submitted all teams who managed to get people together to participate. We didn't make a selection. My biggest concern was that the teams would get lost, drop out but all our teams pitched on Sunday (we even got a few late submissions).

We didn't limit the ideas submitted to the hackathon - you could come to hack an existing service or build something from scratch. That created an uneven situation for the teams, but our goal this time was to get as many successful solutions out there quickly, so we welcomed everyone.

*Learnings/suggestions:*

*Could try evaluation of team submissions.*

## **Mentoring**

In our case, we got people to commit on very short notice, so most of our mentors were on call. Only a handful of these people got to commit the whole weekend.

So naturally, we had our "hands-on mentors" who were active on Slack and could be used for checkpoints, direct calls etc and "on-call mentors" who we could call with specific tasks. They were all added to Slack but differed with their activity level.

*Find the hand-on mentors from your network, get them to commit for the whole weekend. Have all the experts and public sector (might be busy with other things atm) in the "on-call" list, brief them upfront about the hackathon concept and why you need their help. Only choose those mentors you know are passionate and up to the task. Their effort is critical.*

We chose one boss mentor who was also in the core team - he/she was also participating in the core team meetings and was keeping the organising team up to date with teams' progress. (Here's a shout out to our boss mentor Calum Cameron.)

*If you have a lot of teams, you can share the teams between several boss mentors.*

### Separate Slack channels for communicating with mentors

We invited all the mentors to a private channel on Slack for sharing instructions. And also had a public mentor channel where all the questions to mentors were asked and also where teams shared their progress at checkpoints. I think it worked to have all of that in one channel, but it needed to be managed by the boss mentor - meaning reading the requests and tagging possible mentors to the question etc.

### Shared sheet to keep track of progress

From the results of the team registration Typeform, we built a shared Google sheet where the mentors made comments about each team after every checkpoint or deep dive call. We kept that sheet in the overall organisers mastersheet (all information in one place!) and trusted that everyone will use it with care :)

### Checkpoints

When you submit a team to a hackathon, it is the mentors' job to help them to deliver by Sunday. Checkpoints are important to keep track of the teams and help them to focus and give

guidance. We tried several formats for a checkpoint - I'd say we are still to find the perfect solution :)

We tried:

- to have teams to fill in a Google form with their progress on Sat morning (wanted to gather longer text from them about their plan for a prototype),
- we got them to start a team thread in the public mentor channel Saturday night (the team posted a PPP report and ALL mentors could see it and comment/advise under the thread) and
- we ran a 3 hour webinar Sun morning to check-in with all the team leads face-to-face (we wanted to check in to see their prototype and check their readiness for the final. That really worked, the learning is to do it in parallel groups with different mentors.)

### Deep dive calls

Our boss mentor also detected that the checkpoints might not be enough to give them guidance, so he quickly found and assigned each team a dedicated mentor who would jump in a deep dive call with them. During physical hackathons you can read if the team dynamics are working or not, if they explain what they are doing in an unison manner or not, if there are conflicts or not. In a virtual hackathon this information is hidden, so having the whole team on call for 15 and talking about how they are doing will reveal a lot of additional information.

### *Learnings/suggestions:*

*Nanny-gang worked wonderfully. In LV HackForce hackathon, we asked all of the mentors on private mentors channel to fill in their availability for the upcoming hackathon days (in the master file). The ones who entered "flexible" for most of the time got added to another private nanny-gang Slack channel. Each nanny was then assigned to nurse 3-4 teams (5 is absolute max) and be directly responsible to get them to the end. Mentor-team assignments were first done by the mentor preference, then boss-mentor choice, then random. You must expect that some nannies won't be present all of the time, so it should be clearly communicated to all of the nannies that they can "steal" a team from another nanny; or teams can have multiple nannies. Get as many nannies as possible. Regularly (right about the checkpoint times) remind the nannies to reach out to their hack-babies to do deep-dive calls and PPP reports, and report on the "team progress / mentors feedback" sheet. Nannies are also asked to pull in other specialised mentors to team channels, as they find necessary.*

*Adding to this (HackForce) - as we happened to have an extra Zoom webinar account available, we ran the video check-in call on the last day with all teams in 2 parallel tracks (definitely highly recommend to those hackathons having 30+ teams); the call setup was: 1 moderator (manages Zoom + finds teams, organises sequence, and sometimes cracks funny jokes), 2 mentors, who give short and relevant input. If you can - get someone, who has already done these calls as 1 of the 2 mentors (thanks @marko). Running it in parallel also ensures that teams get input early on and have more time to prepare the video pitch.*

*Another learning - we only gave Guaana link after these video calls, so people don't ask for "updates", however, we communicated the structure of the info beforehand (on the previous night).*



## Final pitches

For the final submissions we also used Guaana platform - we got the teams to fill in their information (problem, solution, impact that your solutions will have, go-to-market plan, resources that you need, what did you achieve over the weekend) and pre-record a 2-min pitch.

The evaluation process and the webinar with final pitches were happening in parallel. We wanted the evaluation process to start earlier and it was more efficient for the evaluators to read through the forms and watch the videos on their own and not sit through the webinar. The webinar's goal was to show the final results to the general public.

We posted the instructions for the teams on Slack Saturday night and also shared the final jury members.

## Evaluation

We did the evaluation in 2 phases. First phase was online: we invited 15 people (chose active mentors and jury members) who all evaluated 6-7 teams on a scale of 1-5. That gave us a ranking order of all the teams. Second phase was a Zoom call between the final jury members (7 members from the private and public sector), the top 10 teams were discussed more thoroughly and votes were given to get the top 5. Prizes were assigned to these teams.

We set a very simple evaluating criteria. 4 pillars: impact (most effective for crisis management + creating post-crisis value props), team, prototype, video pitch. We used a pre-existing jury that we could summon fast enough.

## Final webinar

That was really painful :D We decided to show all the 30 teams and their 2-min pitch videos. We only finished downloading the videos about 3 min before the webinar started. And also tried out different zoom features on the go (eg getting the team lead to say a few words after the video, trying to figure out screen share and chat features and so on). Despite it being real amateur hour, it was the best experience. We had our president and IT minister saying welcoming words, we got through the 30 pitches and we opened up a bottle of champagne in the end (only to pour it all on the floor).

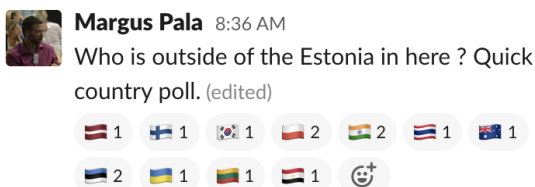
## *Learnings/suggestions:*

*Upload all the videos in an online platform (Youtube etc) for everyone to see and only show the top ones in the webinar. If you can time it, then use the top 10 the evaluators have chosen and show only those teams in the webinar. Alternatively, let mentors choose their top 10-15 and show these. The webinar otherwise gets too long and boring.*

*Keep your champagne in the refrigerator! :)*

## Community management

The people kept on joining Slack although the teams were already formed. I'm happy that we could also create a platform for people who maybe felt they wanted to contribute somehow from their homes. We gathered over 1000 people in Slack of whom 150 were actively participating in teams and about 50 were mentors and team. Naturally one channel was where our team and participants started posting news stories, important developments and pics from their team meetings.



### *Learnings/suggestions:*

*We (HackForce) got overloaded with Slack questions, so assigned a “Slack police”, dedicated person, especially for the “Ask me anything” channel (to monitor, ask, and involve others).*

## Communication and PR

### **Pre-hackathon**

We got as many local media outlets on board to share the initial announcement in their channels. The problem descriptions need to come outside of the IT bubble, so it was important to us to get this announcement in the traditional media outlets. Also got a local site to set up a live blog where we created our own content throughout the event.

We wrote a press release in Estonian and English. To gather the ideas we focused on the local outlets mostly.

Gathering the participants happened mostly through social media. Our main channel was Facebook (and later added Instagram and LinkedIn as well). The FB event spread quickly - we did quick FB ads and asked for all of our network to share - local community orgs, friends, family. Personal invites always work the best.

### **During-hackathon**

If all the local outlets have picked you up, start pushing for international media. Look into your close network and tap into theirs. If you have awesome friends (like Sten Saluveer) they will connect you with Forbes ;)

Write a very good press release in English and start talking to as many reporters as you can.

Think of a message that would capture them precisely. So if your comms. person is tireless (like Elis!) then you get Reuters to pick it up.

If the journalists are not yet interested, then get them to commit to share the results that come out and/or publish the final webinar on their page.

### **Post-hackathon**

Write blogs, articles, social media posts about the hack. Most importantly, help the teams that are pushing forward to get their word out.

*Learnings/suggestions:*

### **Partnerships/sponsors**

Your goal here is firstly to get the word out, find mentors and most importantly to find prizes/funds to support the teams after the hackathon to push their service live as quickly as possible. Material prizes are always a good motivation/perk but in this case think about mostly what can help the teams to move forward on lightning speed (funds for further development, specific mentoring).

We were in a good position to have our IT minister Kaimar Karu supporting us and the government accelerator AccelerateEstonia (especially public sector master Mikk Vainik) as an organiser. That meant we could allocate budget to support the best teams and help to get all the necessary public sector contacts.

Think about your warm contacts first who can come on board quickly. We had our main community organisations sharing the word, helping to find mentors and giving out free memberships/mentoring as prizes.

And because it is a communal cause, the cool companies will reach out and offer their help themselves (woop-woop Tele2 and Chris Robbins).

*Learnings/suggestions:*

*HackForce - leveraged warm contacts first, but half of money prizes were offered already on the go by corporates - do not forget that sector. We involved corporate people as mentors and part of the org team early on, I guess that helped spread the message (in our case woop-woop to 2 telcos Tet, LMT, a bank - Swedbank, and others).*

### **Fun**

There's always a special element of fun. I hope the teams enjoyed these crazy 48 hours. We started a #selfie channel on Slack to have people share a pic of themselves and put together a collage. Think of these little fun things to engage people - but don't take away too much of their valuable hacking time.

It is really important to keep the team spirit with either good or bad humour! This helps relieve stress and move forward faster.



*Learnings/suggestions:*

*Teach people to use /giphy function on Slack.*

**Post-hack**

During the hack, have a dedicated channel on Slack where you just dump all the comments and ideas you have on the go. Analyse yourself and please share these to this doc as well. :)

Send out a feedback form to your participants. Celebrate the praise with your team, analyse what you can do differently next time.

Please give us the link to the results (blog post, result page etc). We will be posting them to this community website (link coming soon) as a resource for all hackathon teams to reach out when they are doing a similar project.

**Give yourself a big high five - you did something amazing!**

*Any other comments:*