

VHA INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

VHA Health Care Hackathon Playbook

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VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

CHANGING LIVES. SAVING LIVES.



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Revision History

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FDA

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VA Clinicians and Administrative Leaders

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Introduction

Thank you for your interest in hosting a VHA health care hackathon. This playbook is based on best practices and lessons learned from the VHA Innovation Ecosystem’s experience organizing and hosting hackathons and serves as a guide for Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Centers (VAMCs) interested in hosting VHA health care hackathons to foster innovation, build stronger ties within their community, and promote VA’s commitment to innovation. Throughout the playbook, you will find real-world examples and case studies from previous events.

The playbook breaks down VHA health care hackathons into three stages: pre-event, event, and post-event and highlights key activities that should be completed within each stage. As you move through each section, the playbook will help you identify how your goals impact the decisions you make regarding planning and executing the event. The playbook is a living document and will be adapted along the way to include lessons learned and best practices from the field. Also, throughout the playbook, there are Key Considerations that highlight some of the most pertinent topics as the team moves through the event process.

WHAT IS A VHA HEALTH CARE HACKATHON?

As you get started, it is important to remember the differences between a traditional hackathon model and a VHA health care hackathon. A VHA health care hackathon is a race to solve challenges against time, varying in duration from one or a few days but normally not longer than a few days. Participants come from diverse backgrounds, address pain points in health care delivery from a user experience perspective, and assess business viability as an integral component of their hacks. VHA health care hackathons also bring together people spanning the whole health care ecosystem. Teams can include patients, nurses, doctors, students, engineers, developers, designers, businesspeople, insurers, and policy experts. Together, teams attack specific health care challenges facing Veterans, VA employees, local and senior VHA leadership, and the wider community. These collaborations help streamline the process for identifying and scaling promising practices and establish mutually beneficial relationships to foster sustainable innovation networks. Table 1 outlines key differences between a traditional hackathon and a VHA health care hackathon.

Table 1. Traditional Hackathons vs. VHA Health Care Hackathons.

Attribute	Traditional Hackathon	VHA Health Care Hackathon
Participants	People with technical backgrounds come together, form teams around a problem or idea, and collaboratively code a unique solution from scratch.	People with technical, health care, design, engineering, business planning, and multiple other disciplines come together to address health care problems from a patient or system level. Using technology or an analog approach, they develop unique solutions from scratch.
Structure	Often, there is no follow up after the event. Teams leave with an award or a memory and must mature their solution on their own.	After-event engagement is a critical component to a VHA health care hackathon. Teams with solutions that are identified as having potential impact on Veteran health care are offered opportunities for additional engagement, including mentorship, incubation, access to data, access to Veteran care providers, or Veteran focus groups.



Key Considerations

- ▶ These events are NOT for matching established solutions to presented challenges; they are for DESIGNING NEW SOLUTIONS to challenges.
- ▶ Ensure those who are pitching the challenges are actually pitching a challenge and not suggesting a solution to said challenge.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF HOSTING A VHA HEALTH CARE HACKATHON?

VHA health care hackathons are a powerful way to engage individuals across public and private sectors—government, health care, industry, and academia—in collaborative solution engineering to address some of VHA’s biggest challenges. Through these events, employees help VHA design and scale innovative solutions to Veteran challenges and establish mutually beneficial relationships that foster sustainable innovation networks. These events provide many opportunities for VHA, including:

- **Sourcing innovation**, while VHA has many tools and methods to source innovative ideas that originate from frontline staff, hackathons open the door to innovative ideas that exist outside the organization. VHA staff who attend hackathons can work with participants to help them identify challenges and shape their problem statements; as a result, hackathons provide frontline staff with an opportunity to foster innovations that specifically address challenges that Veterans and caretakers face daily.
- **Building innovative communities** that include members spanning both public and private sector industries. Also important in the establishment of these communities is the development of strategic partnerships. These partnerships are not based on monetary exchange but on the strengths that each partner brings to the event. The strategic partnerships that VHA forms through hackathons can be long-lasting and extend beyond the event. Furthermore, the experience of developing strategic partnerships can benefit VHA staff and instill valuable lessons about making these partnerships work.
- **Rewarding innovative thinking** and promoting a culture of innovation across VHA.
- Identifying new talent and **discovering subject matter experts** specific to enterprise needs.

VHA adds value to hackathons, including:

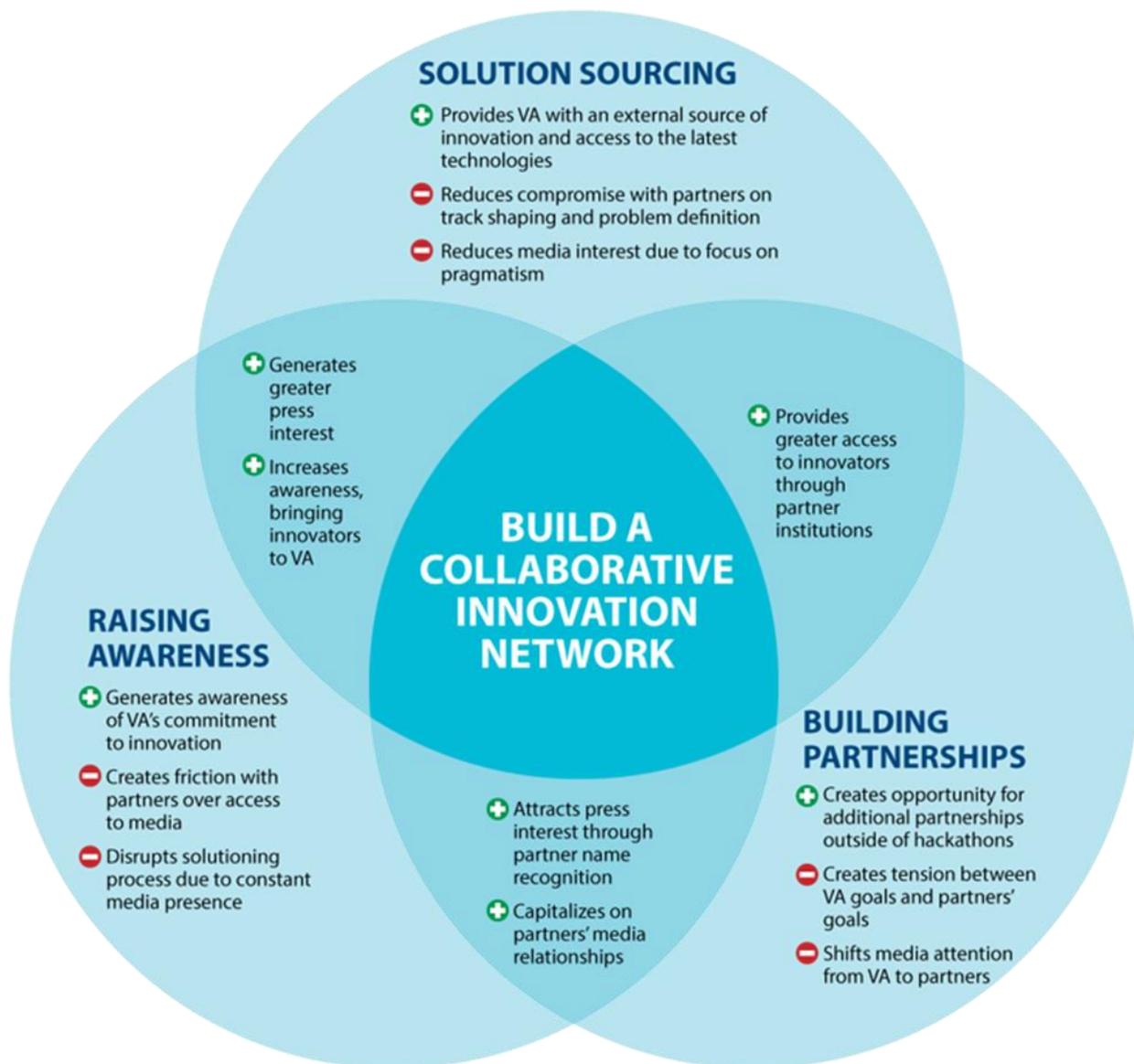
- **Access to resources**, like Application Programming Interface (APIs) and incubation and acceleration opportunities
- **Access to practitioners.**
- **Access and insight to Veterans** and the challenges they face in health care.



Primary Goal Identification

VHA facilities that want to host a VHA health care hackathon typically find they share a few common goals: **sourcing solutions** to challenges they face, **building partnerships** within their communities, and **raising awareness** of innovations taking place at their facility. These goals are not mutually exclusive; in fact, facilities typically want to achieve all three goals to some degree. However, it is important to establish a primary goal prior to pre-event planning because, though event planning will be similar, each goal leads to its own set of special considerations that will impact the decisions made throughout the planning process. Figure 1 captures some of the exclusive benefits and challenges to each goal type as well as some of the potential intersections between each.

Figure 1. Goal Benefits and Challenges





SOURCING SOLUTIONS (OUTPUT-FOCUSED)

Solution sourcing focuses on addressing specific challenges that a facility (or a community) faces. This goal is usually a priority when a clearly defined problem requires an innovative solution. Facilities that prioritize this goal should approach VHA health care hackathons with an emphasis on solving VA challenges. Additionally, these facilities may want to invite key clinical stakeholders to participate or observe the event, as these stakeholders will work with the winning teams in the post-event stage.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

VHA facilities typically invite other organizations within the community to participate in the event, or even strategically partner with those organizations to run the event together. When building partnerships within the community is the main goal, facilities need to consider their partner's goals and interests as they make choices about the event. Facilities must have a plan to continue engaging their partners after the event is complete, transitioning from a one-off partnership to a long-term relationship with the other organizations. To support the building of partnerships between VA and other organizations, a Cooperative Research and Development Agreement may be necessary. An example is available in Appendix F.

RAISING AWARENESS

The culture of innovation at VHA can be a well-kept secret. VHA health care hackathons provide a platform for increasing the community's awareness of this culture and promoting the great work being done in Veteran health care. Additionally, hackathons can increase the community's understanding of the capacity of VHA facilities to provide an environment where innovation is embraced and potentially incubated.

DEFINING SUCCESS

Clearly communicating and understanding the intended outcomes of each stakeholder group is critical. The success of the event will mean different things to different stakeholders as each holds their own expectation. Establishing understanding across the group can create a collaborative and environment.

As a group, identify metrics that will help you measure the event's success. These metrics should align with the goals you have identified throughout the planning stages. For example, if your goal is to encourage community building, then metrics on the number of local residents or organizations willing to participate in the event can be useful to assessing your event's success. Remember, it is important to establish a target and corresponding metrics that can be easily calculated.



Key Considerations for Identifying Goals and Defining Success

- ▶ **Do the metrics you chose align with the goals** you established when you decided to host an event?
- ▶ **Are the metrics you chose specific** and measurable? Have you set a target for each metric that will indicate whether you achieved your goal?



The Planning Process

This playbook breaks VHA health care hackathons into three planning stages: pre-event, event, and post-event. The following sections outline key activities that should be completed within each stage. Additionally, there are activities that span the stages, needing consideration or action throughout the process. See Appendix E for checklists for each of the three stages of the event. **Figure 2.** summarizes some of the most pertinent activities, including those that span stages.

Figure 2. Event Stages



PRE-EVENT PLANNING

Welcome to the bulk of the work! Critical thinking, decision-making, and organizing happens in this phase of hackathon development. Pre-event planning is essential to the success of any VHA health care hackathon. While this section does not identify all the details you will need to consider—much of it will depend on your primary goal and your facility—it does provide a basic framework for planning your VHA health care hackathon.

While defining the problem is listed first, it is important to note that this may not always be the case. In some cases, depending on your primary goal for the event, you may identify stakeholders before



defining the problem. This is particularly evident in events when the primary goal is building awareness or community.

Defining the Problem

VHA health care hackathons require a problem for the participants to solve. Specific problems that narrow the scope will provide you with greater control over the outcome; for example, “a Veteran amputee needs to be able to hike over rocky terrain, but his current prosthetic is static and does not allow the level of agility he needs.” In this example, you would receive solutions focused on providing an enhanced prosthetic.

You do not always need a problem as specific as the example above, but you should try to limit the scope as much as possible. If there are common pain points between stakeholders who are organizing the hackathon, this may serve as a starting point for defining your problem. If you cannot reach a specific problem like the one above, try limiting your problem (or problems) to certain tracks. For example, a hackathon might have tracks for “mobility” and “rural health.” Participants in each of these tracks would have some guidance, providing the freedom to pitch their own problems.

The level of specificity to your problem may also impact some decisions about how you format your event. For example, if you have a single, specific problem, such as the example about prosthetics, then you may want to consider being more active in the team-formation process. You might look at the list of participants and split them into teams to ensure background diversity across each team.



Key Considerations for Defining the Problem

- ▶ Does it drive real impact?
- ▶ Does it allow for a variety of solutions?
- ▶ Does it have enough context to get started?



Identifying and Engaging Stakeholders

When organizing your hackathon, you must determine your stakeholders, both internally and, eventually, externally. Often, this happens simultaneously with your work to define your problem and primary goal. Within VA, you must identify staff who are invested in creating change and opportunities to positively impact Veteran care and their work environment. Some of these staff may become part of your planning team, while others may provide input and serve as mentors during the event. Identifying this group up front is crucial because they will help you identify your primary goal and provide support throughout the planning process.

Stakeholder Identification

To successfully deliver a hackathon event, it is important to establish a planning team with clear roles and responsibilities. Depending on the size of the hackathon, this may be one individual or multiple individuals. The planning team should consist of people with expertise in different focus areas or disciplines, including project planning, event planning, marketing, and communications. You will need a leader who has experience in event coordination and logistics and has internal or community connections to obtain access to a venue. Additionally, logistics and communication planning are essential components; having these areas covered ensures a comprehensive approach to launching your event.

PLANNING TEAM SKILL SET

- ▶ Leadership
- ▶ Event Planning
- ▶ Logistics
- ▶ Communications

As you begin identifying internal and external stakeholders, you must understand the different roles involved in VHA health care hackathon events. Each role is a critical component to the synergy of the event. The table below provides roles that commonly appear in VHA health care hackathons. These roles are a recommended starting point, but you may find you need to alter them slightly to fit the nuances of your event.

Table 2. Event Role Descriptions

Role	Description
Event Facilitator	An event facilitator can be an individual or a small committee of people. This role calls for careful planning before the event and real-time problem-solving during the event. The considerations made by this individual or team set the tone for the event and should be thoughtfully staffed.
Participant	Participants represent many disciplines (e.g., engineers, students, industry experts, designers, health care professionals) and have many different agendas. They can create a team or join one at the event to develop solution(s) for Veteran challenges. The participant base will be influenced by the goal of the event.
Mentor	Mentors are subject matter experts (SMEs) in areas that support event efforts and can include engineers, venture capitalists, prosthetists, entrepreneurs, doctors, social workers, designers, and beyond. They provide support and guidance to teams in each phase of solutioning, especially in the earliest phase when teams are trying to empathize and ideate. It is important to choose mentors from diverse disciplines, give them purpose within their areas of expertise, and provide them





Role	Description
	with training on engaging teams (see Appendix A for training outline). A good rule of thumb as you recruit mentors is to strive for a ratio of approximately one mentor to 10 participants. Most importantly, make sure not to have too many mentors because it can become distracting to the progress of the teams.
Speakers (Keynotes and Breakout Sessions)	<p>Speakers are often SMEs in areas that support event efforts or provide important context.</p> <p>At the beginning of your event, keynote speakers play a critical role in exciting participants and guiding them toward your goal. Your keynote speakers should be reflective of your goal. For example, if your goal is solution sourcing, practicing clinicians who are intimately familiar with your problems can offer compelling stories and provide valuable context to participants; or, if your goal is community building, then a local influencer or leader at a sponsoring organization may be a better choice.</p> <p>Additionally, having speakers at a breakout session can add to the excitement of the event. Speakers can offer insight into a resource that can help participants during the different stages of building their solutions. An example is a speaker who provides basic information on Human-Centered Design (HCD), which can help participants remain focused on the person facing the problem as they build their solutions.</p>
Judge	Judges are SMEs and leaders in problem/challenge areas, business planning, and much more, based on the purpose of your event. They can also be experts who represent potential partners and their perspective. They will observe pitches, ask clarifying questions, and score the effectiveness and impact of the potential solutions presented by teams. The number of judges is less important than balancing the areas of expertise. Be sure expertise is reflective of the goal(s) of your event.
Sponsor	Sponsor companies often have different goals in mind, including recruiting, brand exposure, and product feedback. Groups, businesses, or other stakeholders can consider sponsoring a meal, snack, activity, or the entire event to meet their goal, and they also often offer one or more prizes.

Within VA, you will need to identify “innovation champions.” The innovation champions will need to be in a position to assist the team in navigating the complex VA health care system. These individuals can come from a variety of service lines or departments.

After you identify potential internal stakeholders, you can begin to assess potential partners and external stakeholders. If you already have a specific problem in mind that you would like to address, it is worth considering whether other organizations in the community have an interest in solving that problem as well. If you do not have a problem already defined, these external stakeholders may help you define the problem.

Some important areas where you may find external stakeholders include:

- **Academia:** Hackathons provide an opportunity to partner with academic institutions, leveraging their business and technical expertise to execute the event and increasing access to innovative thinkers who are engaged in learning in different and complementary areas of study.
- **Industry:** Representatives from private sector health care systems, health care start-ups, technology firms, and more, offer insight and expertise on practices, pain points, and perspectives that can guide solution development.
- **Community:** VA is consistently communicating “we cannot do this alone.” This message resonates locally as Veterans access services in their communities every day. Engaging local non-profits that serve Veterans and local business outside of the health care industry can add to the perspective and raise awareness of VA efforts.

Remember some stakeholders may not be interested in solving the exact same problems as you but may still want to participate. For example, a company might be interested in the positive media that results from supporting Veteran health care, or they may be interested in identifying innovators in the community who they can recruit. Regardless, your primary goal does not need to perfectly align with your potential partners’ goals, so long as you understand what those goals include.

Stakeholder Engagement

Engaging stakeholders does not just happen in the pre-event phase, it is an ongoing effort throughout and after the event. There is key guidance offered to stakeholder groups as they form around mutual interest areas; paying attention to these areas of focus will help you engage and manage your stakeholder group.

Communicate

Before engaging and influencing stakeholders, it is important to understand them. Sharing information with stakeholders is important, but it is equally important to gather information about them.

Often, we find ourselves in a position of having to initiate a new relationship. Many departments or service lines within VA have people who connect with other individuals/enterprises and businesses on behalf of the entire department. When this is not available, follow the steps outlined below to engage with potential stakeholders.

1. **Inquire:** Learn about the stakeholder’s priorities, their pain points, their business, and what motivates their organization.
 - Research the organization
 - If it is an initial engagement, identify the primary point of contact (POC)
 - Ask open-ended questions (see Appendix B for examples)
2. **Describe:** After learning about them, describe VHA innovation, the problem, the event, and your purpose.
 - Create an outline for your pitch
 - Describe why you are engaging them
 - Discuss the value of their engagement and VHA work
3. **Connect (the Dots):** Stakeholder priorities + VA priorities = stronger solutions



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Once you identify areas of mutual priority and/or common pain points on which you can collaborate, your focus will shift from initiating a mutually beneficial relationship to maintaining one.

Consult Early and Often

The early stages of planning may be unclear to your stakeholder groups. Regular meetings and periodic check-ins are essential to level-setting and continuing progress forward.

Plan (Include the Stakeholders)

Spend time considering the best way forward in engaging the different stakeholders. Describing roles and responsibilities and helping stakeholders find the best fit for their expertise and time commitment can bring significant benefits to the event.

Develop Relationships (Mutual Understanding and Trust)

You have spent time learning about each stakeholder and their priorities. This understanding begins the development of a relationship and is the first step toward building trust. Where there is trust, people work together more easily and effectively. Investing in this effort can also increase confidence across the event roll-out and speed up problem-solving and decision-making.

Compromise/Manage the Risk

Remember that stakeholders are great resources, but they are also potential sources of risk. Using foresight to anticipate and mitigate risk can keep the event moving forward. Initially spending time setting expectations across the stakeholder group will create an environment of understanding and efficiency.

Define Roles and Responsibilities

Describing roles and responsibilities and helping stakeholders find the best fit for their expertise and time commitment can bring significant benefits to the event and avoid confusion.



Key Considerations for Identifying and Engaging Stakeholders

- ▶ **Do the assigned roles align with stakeholders' interests and skillsets?**
- ▶ **Are the assigned roles and responsibilities realistic given stakeholders' bandwidth?**

Setting Evaluation Criteria

Establishing criteria to evaluate the solutions presented at the end of a VHA health care hackathon is critical to ensuring the event's output (i.e., solutions) addresses your initial goals. The criteria also assist judges, guiding them in a collaborative manner. The purpose of the criteria is to assess whether solutions address unmet needs that have been historically difficult to solve.

When setting criteria, keep your overall goal in mind. For example, if your main goal is solution sourcing, then you may want to emphasize pragmatism and business value.

VHA health care hackathons offer a great opportunity to further emphasize a culture that allows for safely “failing small.” Regardless of the goal of the event, evaluating solutions based on relevant criteria adds validity to the process. Criteria examples include:

- **Business Value:** VHA Innovation Ecosystem has created concise criteria on which to measure innovations for scaling. Early-stage solutions resulting from a VHA health care hackathon will most likely not be mature enough to determine the impact on these values; however, it may be helpful to have these important measures in mind as you consider their potential:
 - **Clinical Value** (e.g., decreasing readmission and improving patient health conditions)
 - **Financial Value:** (e.g., reducing hospital costs and increasing costs through timely resolution of issues)
 - **Operational Value:** (e.g., decreased wait times, improved satisfaction survey scores, and improved employee retention)
 - **Veteran Value:** (e.g., improved patient satisfaction and increased patient participation)
- **Problem Applicability:** Determine if the solution is clearly focused on the problem; if it is, ensure it was developed with empathy for the user.
- **Realistic Capability:** The solution must be accessible to the user.
- **Level of Innovation:** Innovation is defined within the VHA Innovation Ecosystem as the conversion of a new idea (e.g., product, program, technology) into a solution that delivers value to customers (e.g., Veterans). It is not necessary for the solution to be technology-based or complicated to be innovative; it simply needs to deliver value to the customer.



Key Considerations for Setting Evaluation Criteria

- ▶ **Do the assigned weights for the evaluation criteria support the overall goal you established for the event?**

Shaping Tracks

At VHA health care hackathons, tracks are used to sort participants into groups based on common areas of focus. Within each track, participants form teams to tackle a problem related to the track’s focus. For example, a team in a rural health track may decide to work on a problem related to telehealth. Typically, participants pitch their own ideas of problems within a track and then form teams that investigate those problems and offer a solution; however, you may decide to pitch specific problems within a track to the participants. Tracks can be general or specific. For example, an event might have a “mental health” track or a “mental health and homelessness” track. More specificity leads to a higher degree of control over the output. However, tracks that are too specific may risk turning off some potential participants. When determining which tracks to use and how specific to make them, consider your goals again. If your goal is solution sourcing, then you may want to employ specific tracks that ensure solutions are aligned with your areas of need. If your goal is to build partnerships, then your tracks should be a mutual area of interest between you and your partners.



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Key Considerations for Shaping Tracks

- ▶ **What interests do your partners have?** Do your tracks align to areas of mutual interest or goals?

Envisioning a Path Forward for a Winning Solution(s)

Before the event even begins, you should consider what type of engagement you will have with winning teams after the hackathon is over. Most VHA health care hackathons offer some kind of prize, and VA has resources to offer winning teams, such as a space for further incubation, mentorship, and patient focus groups. If you have a vision for how winning teams will advance their solutions in the VA space before your event begins, you will be in a better space to communicate this with participants and provide them with incentive to participate.



Key Considerations for Envisioning a Path Forward

- ▶ **What steps can you take before the event to ensure that teams are best positioned to advance their solutions after the event?**

Budget and Logistics

You should allot **a minimum** of eight weeks to plan for your event, if possible. During this time, you must determine what resources are necessary to execute the event. Once you have this information, you can begin preparing a budget.

Now, we know money is a tricky topic! We also know you cannot solicit funding as government employees. What you can do is understand what leadership can put forward, what resources you have at hand, and how to access those resources. Some examples of resources are Volunteer Services, internal venue access at your medical center, and external relationships.

Among the many resources you will need, perhaps the most important is a venue. Depending on the venue, you and your team may need to coordinate all the logistics. When evaluating possible venues, remember that the venue will need open Wi-Fi networks and plenty of space for teams.

Wi-Fi is **essential** for the research, solution development, and communication among stakeholders. Ensure the venue has reliable Wi-Fi access that can handle the number of individuals attending your event, and make sure it does not block important portals.

Additionally, teams will need access to whiteboards or another type of canvas for working out their solutions. Ensure you have an ample supply of outlets and extension cords at the venue so teams can charge laptops and phones without disrupting their workflow.

PLANNING IN ADVANCE

- ▶ Venue
- ▶ Wi-fi access
- ▶ Tools for planning and designing
- ▶ Food and beverages



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Finally, having enough food and water is important in the creative process. Be responsible with your food and order food that is relatively healthy. You will need to give consideration to restrictions your participants may have; for example, supplying vegetarian and dairy-free options may be a good idea as these restrictions are common. Avoid heavy foods that make people sleepy, like large sandwiches or pizza, or ineffective—like alcohol. Caffeine and sugar are acceptable—energy is important—but have real nourishment, too. If you are providing meals, ordering a few days in advance will be important. Food can be expensive and having a sponsor purchase a meal may relieve some of that pressure.

A planning committee, composed of internal VA staff and sponsors, will be helpful as you make your decisions for event logistics. Members of the committee can be tasked with executing pieces of the event planning process, such as developing a schedule or ensuring meals are provided. A recurring sync will help you monitor progress and identify areas that may require more resources.



Key Considerations for Budget and Logistics

- ▶ **Are you providing all the resources teams will need throughout the weekend?** If not, are you informing participants before the event of what they will need to provide?
- ▶ **How will you divide responsibilities for logistics among your planning team?** Will one person be responsible for all logistics or will the responsibilities be given to multiple team members?

Developing a Communication Strategy

No matter your goal for your event, communication planning is an important component for recruiting stakeholders and raising internal and external awareness. In Appendix C, you will find an example communication plan and several different tools for organizing your outreach. As you begin to prepare, identify the audience(s) you want to target; focusing your efforts will save time and energy. This is an important component of your pre-event planning, and it will be helpful to identify a communication committee or POC on your planning team to coordinate these efforts.

Remember to use your existing resources, including your local Public Affairs Office (PAO). The PAO is tasked with media outreach and internal communications. They could advise you in your communication efforts. If there is enough lead time, they can support your event or even lead the coordination of important communication.



Key Considerations for Developing a Communication Strategy

- ▶ **Have you established contact between your PAO and your partners' communications team?**
- ▶ **Are there any key themes or stories that you want to highlight** in the media about the event? What do you want people to know about the event?



EVENT

The day has arrived! Your planning has led you to this point, now it is time for that foundation you created to lead to an exciting event. The coordination takes a precision approach and a team of detail-focused people who are prepared to address issues as they arise.

Pre-planning is complete, and your team should all be well-versed in expectations and the appropriate protocol for who to contact with issues. On your schedule, have regular check-in points for your support team and end each day with a quick re-cap and next steps.

Keynote Speeches

Keynote speeches will help set the tone and generate excitement as the event gets underway. You will need the necessary equipment prepared and someone to assist the speaker in setting up their microphones and projector. Prior to starting the event, prepare the speaker to watch for the timekeeper and be diligent about keeping the pace moving—remember, participants are eager to get to work.

Keynote speeches are also a great opportunity for social media outreach to engage the community. If possible, collect drafts of each speaker's remarks ahead of time and identify a few quotes that align with your message. Before the speeches begin, draft a few social media posts that can be published in real time. Remember to tag key stakeholders and utilize any relevant hashtags for the event. This is also detailed in the communications plan in Appendix C.

Keynote speakers can help you achieve your overall goal. For example, organizers who have an interest in solution sourcing may be interested in having problem owners pitch the issue to the teams instead of having a keynote speech, providing more context about the problem. On the other hand, allowing key figures in the community or leaders from partner organizations the opportunity to speak is a good way to cement relationships. Think carefully about who you ask to speak and how they support your goals.



Key Considerations for Keynote Speeches

- ▶ **Does your choice of a keynote speaker(s) align with your overall goal?**
- ▶ **Are your keynote speakers aware of your mission** and comfortable talking about the role of innovation in health care?

Challenge Pitching

The single most important component of the event is to create challenge statements that align with the event theme, tracks, and interests of the participants. There are different methods for delivering challenge statements. Here are some approaches to consider:

- Create broad tracks for participants to consider prior to the event with specific challenge statements offered at the event for teams to choose.
- Create tracks along with specific challenge statements and make these available prior to the event so, upon arrival at the event, teams have ideated and can more quickly begin creating the solution.



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Either way, it is important to create challenge statements without offering solutions and with the customer in mind. Customer challenge statements can sometimes be afterthoughts that have been reverse engineered from a solution that a stakeholder has already decided to fund, or a designer is convinced is awesome. If we do not understand the nuanced experience we are attempting to transform with a potential solution, it is far less likely that we will be successful in transforming it. It is important to understand how to articulate challenges to ensure they do not mislead participants and short-circuit the best solutions. One important measure as challenge statements are being created is, if a product, service, or solution is mentioned in the statement, then it is probably **not** a customer challenge.

Here is an example of an ineffective challenge statement:

Veterans want to be able to schedule appointments using their smartphones.

Here are a couple of examples of more effective challenge statements that may lead to robust, customer-focused, and innovative solutions:

1. *Veterans find the process of scheduling appointments tedious, cumbersome, and time consuming.*
2. *Veterans who use their mobile phones for scheduling appointments find the process tedious, cumbersome, time consuming, and error prone.*

Why are these problem statements potentially more effective?

- They do not suggest a solution
- They target the specific customer group (Veterans) with whom participants can build empathy
- They reflect the **actual** user experience
- They direct the participants to focus on underlying problems
- They provide measurable problems to overcome and a way to measure the success of proposed solutions

CASE STUDY: CAMVETS

In 2019, the VHA Innovation Ecosystem participated as a partner at the Challenge America Makers for Veterans (CAMVETS) Makeathon, organized by Challenge America. Teams were established before the event, and organizers ensured that at least one VA employee was on every team. As a result, teams had access to a valuable resource who understood the VA system and could ensure the innovation was feasible. Additionally, ensuring that VA participants were on each team meant that the innovations would have access to the VA Technology Transfer Program.



Team Formation

Before any solutioning can begin, participants need to form teams. Ideal teams at VHA health care hackathons should be composed of four to eight people with diverse backgrounds. How and when teams are formed can change, mostly depending on the nature of the problem or tracks at the event.

As an example, many teams that have generated Veteran-centered solutions have a Veteran on the team and/or a VA employee who can share their perspective. Another perspective that is a winning addition is that of the end user. In one event, a specific tool was being “hacked” and teams consisted of developers as well as end-users. This make up addressed important considerations without compromising outcomes.



Key Considerations for Team Formation

- ▶ **Are you encouraging the formation of multidisciplinary teams** that have the necessary skills/background to tackle your problem?
- ▶ **Do teams have access to someone with an understanding of the problem?**
- ▶ **Do teams have a member who is familiar with internal workings of VA or are mentors tasked with providing this perspective?**

Setup/Logistics

The environment plays an important role in the participants’ ability to stay engaged. Creating a space that helps participants focus their energy on creative solutioning is the goal and is easy to do with some attention paid to three key areas: space, Wi-Fi, and food.

Set up the venue in a manner that allows groups to work together with the least amount of distraction. Each team should have space to spread out, wall space or whiteboard space for planning, power strips, and accessible space. Check the Wi-Fi periodically to ensure the access is not an issue will keep the event moving.

Keeping energy levels up during the event is critical. You made important food decisions in pre-event planning, and now, it is time to give the participants access to sustenance. Planning team members should monitor quantity and access regularly, especially to water.



Key Considerations for Setup/Logistics

- ▶ **Have you created a space that minimizes distractions?**
- ▶ **Do teams have access to resources** like white boards, power strips, and food?



Media Engagement

During pre-event planning, you engaged your PAO and reached out to media. Now it is time to work with them to maximize the coverage. In the case that you have stakeholders being interviewed, you will want to have quiet space identified. When scheduling interviews, be sure to arrange time for participants so not to interrupt the solutioning process. Lastly, tie the interviews back to the Veteran and create the personal story as much as possible!



Key Considerations for Envisioning a Path Forward

- ▶ **Do you have a clear plan for engaging media**, with times for media to be present and conduct interviews?
- ▶ **Do you have a few teams/participants identified with innovative ideas** who can be connected with the media?
- ▶ **Have you created a quiet space** for interviews?

Mentor Engagement

Participants attend VHA health care hackathons for a number of different reasons, and some have little experience in the process of solution development, working on a team, or design thinking. A good mentor can vastly improve a participant's experience and inspire different and important approaches. Both technical and soft skills are important to the success of teams, and mentorship should not be one-dimensional. For example, product design and career development can be beneficial in the ideation stages where diverse opinions and experiences really matter. Having mentors with different skill sets to impact the trajectory of teams is critical.

Once you have a strong pool of mentors, it is important they understand the rules of engagement. Prior to mentors engaging with teams, hold an introduction and training session; this provides the foundation of expectations and guidelines for engaging with teams. This can also inform mentors on the difference between effective engagement and interfering, when and how to approach a team, how to identify if there is a need for action, and if they have the right skill set to help or if they need to reach out to other mentors. There is a mentor training outline in Appendix A for your reference.

If possible, create a "mentor space" where mentors have the opportunity to engage with each other. This provides mentors with an understanding of what skills and knowledge are available outside of their own area of expertise and further enhances their ability to guide teams.



Key Considerations for Mentor Engagement

- ▶ **Have your mentors met each other**, and do they know which skill sets are available within the mentor pool?
- ▶ **Do you have a system that allows participants to request mentor support?**



Lastly, provide tools or systems for engaging mentors at your event in a constructive way. Some events have a mentor request app that provides participants with the ability to enter their issue into a queue, request a specific focus area, or even a specific mentor. Outside of an app, having mentors circulate and be easily available to teams increases the opportunity for effective engagement.

Team Practice for Solution Pitches

Provide clear guidance on what is expected during pitches. Create a tight timeline and communicate this early to the teams. This will certainly depend on the size of the event, number of participants and teams, number of judges, time limitations, and anticipated maturity of the solutions. A typical timeframe is two to three minutes for a pitch and two to three minutes for a question and answer session with the judges.

GUIDANCE FOR SOLUTION PITCHES

- ▶ Assign speaker
- ▶ Assign demo driver
- ▶ Restate your vision and business opportunity
- ▶ Do not call out challenges to solution
- ▶ Keep slides to a minimum
- ▶ Prepare for Q&A as a part of pitch

Partner-Led Presentations and Workshops

Innovation events, no matter the goal, are learning opportunities. Providing track- and topic-appropriate workshops and presentations can be helpful to the solutioning process. An example of a presentation is one from a partner who can introduce some tools (e.g., technology, data sets) that may be helpful to a solution. Other helpful opportunities are workshops that explain the application of specific skill sets/competencies. An example of this is the delivery of a short introduction to HCD by VA experts; this helps reset the focus of the teams on the problem and provide them with an opportunity to use empathy as they develop their solution.



Key Considerations for Partner-Led Presentations

- ▶ **Are valuable partners being offered opportunities** to highlight their work and contributions to innovation?
- ▶ **Are your presentations and workshops scheduled to provide structured breaks** for participants?

POST-EVENT

The steps you take after the event will directly affect your ability to hold another successful event and solidify relationships with partners and other stakeholders.

After-Action Debrief

In the first few days after an event ends, dedicate time to debrief with all the event organizers, including any external partners. The after-action debrief is an important opportunity to document lessons learned from the event that can be used for future iterations. In addition to discussing opportunities to improve,



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the after-action report is also an opportunity to confirm plans for executing the rest of your post-event activities. A template to guide the conversation during this meeting is in Appendix D.



Key Considerations for the After-Action Report

- ▶ **Are you encouraging constructive criticism** and documenting areas that could be improved at future events?
- ▶ **Are you using this time to establish a clear plan** for following up with winning solutions and other participants? How will you divide responsibilities for post-event activities between internal and external stakeholders?

Winning Solution Advancement: Warm Handoff of Winning Solutions to Output Owners

In the pre-event stage, you determined potential output owners based on the problems you identified. After you complete the event, you should confirm a set of stakeholders that is interested in championing the selected innovations. Introduce these champions to their respective winning teams early to continue the momentum. These champions should work with the team to determine what resources, if any, will be required to further mature the innovation. Resources may include sample data sets or access to focus groups that can help them test a product. Ultimately, this innovation champion is responsible for providing the team with resources and access to other stakeholders as needed.

Figure 3. National Model for Advancing Winning Solutions



Key Considerations for Advancing Winning Solutions

- ▶ **What types of resources will the winning solution(s) require** for implementation in VAMCs?
- ▶ **Do you have an identified innovation champion** who can work with the team and ensure they have the necessary support? Has that person met the team members?



Post-Event Participant Engagement: Maintaining the Connection

Following up with all participants, not just the winners, is important—especially if you intend to hold another VHA health care hackathon in the future. One of the biggest complaints about any hackathon is that there is no follow through and ideas are lost after the weekend ends. After your event, take the opportunity to let participants know that their work will not be forgotten and begin generating excitement for future events. Share the data you collected regarding the ideas and innovations that were generated; even those that were not winners could have potential. Additionally, create a mechanism for teams to report back to you if they further develop their solution and/or if they generated interest outside your facility. Lastly, it is likely that early in your planning process, you identified many stakeholders who would remain engaged after the event. They may be interested in following some of the most promising solutions, functioning as innovation champions, or helping in the planning of your next event.



Key Considerations for Post-Event Participant Engagement

- ▶ **What are the key themes and outcomes you want to highlight** in your post-event communications? Who will be responsible for coordinating these communications?
- ▶ **How can you continue to engage your partner(s)** moving forward? Are there other opportunities to work with them, even outside of innovation events?



Conclusion

Congratulations, you made it through the hackathon playbook! You are well on your way to planning the event, and throughout the process, you are building a strong network and innovation community!

Just a reminder, throughout the process of hosting a VHA health care hackathon, you will face many decisions that amount to trade-offs between the three goal areas. As you make these decisions, it is important to remember the balance you are trying to strike between these goals. If you set out to source solutions to pressing problems at your facility, then feel free to heavily prioritize that goal as you move through the planning process. However, remember that each decision in favor of your primary goal has an impact on your secondary goals.

Each VHA health care hackathon is unique and designed to fit the needs of the organizers. Ultimately, this event is your design. You will hear about various models, such as hackathons, makeathons, and design sprints; these models can be helpful starting points but are not one size fits all. This playbook has presented you with examples from those models, as well as cases and resources you can use to guide you throughout the process.

In the spirit of HCD, this playbook is never really finished. We will continue to provide updates as we uncover more best practices and learn from the experiences of VHA facilities that have hosted their own events.

We encourage you to try everything! Contribute to the growth and value of this playbook and to the advancement of VHA health care hackathons by reaching out to us at vainnovation@atlasresearch.us.

We hope that you will use this resource to hold an event that helps you advance your local culture of innovation!