



"Hack the Crisis" contestants, an online hackathon held during COVID-19. Image: Garage 48

# COVID-19 TALENT SHOW: A WAR AGAINST THE CRISIS

Hackathons are an opportunity for young people to improve their future while problem-solving the pandemic



By CRISTINA CARRASCO

One of the few things that Amrid Baveja, a high school student from California, and Péter Lakatos, a recent Master's graduate from Budapest, have in common is that they have improved their chances for a better future while helping solve problems caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Neither of them has participated in your typical TV contest. Instead, they have succeeded in another type of talent show: hackathons.

Traditionally, hackathons are contests of ideas where people team up and try to solve a given problem — for instance in health, education or finance — usually through technology. The current pandemic makes creative solutions more important than ever.

Open to people of most ages and economic backgrounds, these events tend to attract young people. They may seem only open to engineers, coders, or tech geeks, but they welcome all types of skills. "We need business developers, communication experts, editors, etc.," says Merit Vislapu, project manager at Garage48, an organiser of these events.

COVID-19, has changed the established format of hackathons. The pandemic has moved them online, allowing people from all over the world to enter and to work together. Since there is no need to be physically present, it is easier to find and collaborate with teammates.

The goal of hackathons has changed too — instead of looking for a winner, organisers hope to find projects that can solve specific problems caused by the pandemic and to do so as quickly as possible.

This could be good news to young people who, according to the United Nations, will be some of the hardest hit by unemployment due to COVID-19. In the UK alone, youth unemployment could rise by 640,000 this year, according to a report from the Resolution Foundation think tank.

## Hackathons have become a great recruiting tool

Against this backdrop, record numbers of contestants are taking part in these events. The Global Hack has become the largest online hackathon in the world, and EUvsVirus has one of the highest number of ideas submitted in one contest, with close to 2,200 entries.

"We are amazed by what is happening," says project manager Vislapu. Her company, Garage48, has organised almost 70 of these events during the pandemic. In her experience, usually, only one or two ideas a year are genuinely implemented, whereas they now have had more than eight ideas turned into real projects from just

one hackathon. "They've become a great recruiting tool," she says.

The Global Hack's media manager, Arnaud Castagnet, explains that in these uncertain times, hackathons provide prime opportunities for young people to invest in their future through networking and finding entrepreneurial opportunities or funding. Especially since "countries can't lose more time."

"Professionals and big organisations are joining these initiatives and are beginning to see the value in it," says recent Master's graduate Péter Lakatos, a member of Team Discover. His team scored a prize in the EUvsVirus hackathon for creating eye-glasses that allow a patient to monitor their own vital signs, saving nurses' time.

Amrid Baveja and the rest of his InsideScoop team, who won The Global Hack with an app that improves student-teacher engagement, had the chance to connect with great mentors and entrepreneurs. "We wouldn't have had the opportunity to connect with them in any other way," Bajeva says.

Hackathons are not, however, a magic formula for future success. Cataignet from The Global Hack says the hardest part is what comes afterwards. "You need a follow-up, work as hard as you can to take advantage of the resources you are given," he says.



Péter Lakatos and Márton Elodi working on their winning design for EU vs. Virus hackathon. Image: Péter Lakatos