

Controlled chaos

A look at the world of hackathons and the innovation they create

Hackathons — think hacking and marathon — are a recent phenomenon growing in popularity on college campuses, sometimes involving students from other campuses who travel to compete in an industry-specific event. A visit to one of these events will drop you into another universe of laptops, prototypes, sleeping bags, coffee, pizza, half-eaten bagels and controlled chaos.

Kent State University has excelled in the hackathon world through organization of the variously themed Innov8athon, designed to promote “entrepreneurial thinking, creative prototyping and interdisciplinary collaboration.”



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Remesh, an app that allows groups of people to speak as one voice, emerged from Kent Hack Enough and the first Innov8athon in 2013 and has since become a successful venture with support from Cleveland-based accelerator Flashstarts.

The Innov8athon program staged the world's first Fashion/Tech Hackathon event in 2014, successfully repeated in 2015. In its second year, 144 students from 19 universities and 23 different majors together delivered 30 projects over a timespan of a mere 38 sleepless hours.

A joint project of LaunchNET Kent State, the renowned KSU Fashion School, and other university partners including Liquid Crystal Institute, the event challenged teams of students to design wearable technology products.

The 2015 winning idea was a backpack outfitted with GPS navigation conceived by a combined team of students from Parsons New School of Design and State University of New York Buffalo who met on the bus trip to Kent.

These students commented on the richness of the experience designing with a blended team from fashion and computer science. The third Fashion/Tech Hackathon took place late last month.

Ready to innovate

Companies like Facebook, Google and Microsoft sometimes sponsor their own internal hackathons to brainstorm new ideas — in fact, the Facebook “like” button was developed in an internal

hackathon. At Kent State, Sherwin-Williams co-sponsored a November 2015 Innov8athon that tasked 40 students divided into 10 teams with re-examination of the painting process and its tools.

For sponsoring companies, benefits include the potential discovery of new ideas, contact with talented students and the chance to promote innovative and entrepreneurial thinking on campus. Students participate to learn new skills with their peers, engage in rapid prototyping, interact with like-minded students and possibly come up with a great idea that will turn into a venture or attract the attention of an employer.

Julie Messing, executive director of LaunchNET Kent State, says, university hackathons are generally led by students, for students. Kent State students, through the campus organization, HackSU, have been leading successful Kent Hack Enough events since spring 2013.

LaunchNET chose to take the hackathon concept to another level by collaborating with faculty and students across the university to spark innovation and entrepreneurial thinking. After two years as Innov8athon, KSU's Fashion/Tech Hackathon graduated to an independent event for 2016. This allows the university to evolve Innov8athon in order to explore other disciplines, industries and solutions.

Kent State is at the forefront of the hackathon movement, Messing says, and “it has become a key strategy for embedding the innovation and entrepreneurial mindset across our campus.” ●