



Social Hackathons as a tool for user involvement

The method of hackathon as a development event is well known from the IT sector, in Estonian Võrumaa County they try to extend this multidisciplinary innovation approach to the welfare system.

They describe their pilot like this:

Our target group is vulnerable people (people with disabilities, mental health problems and elderly people) but our approach embraces problems at the level of local communities instead of clinical or welfare categories. We work with small communities and their initiatives targeting vulnerable people in an integrated way.

The co-creating parties are local governments, service providers, user groups but also entrepreneurs, community leaders and fellow citizens. By bringing together people with diverse backgrounds, experience, and expertise in a single location over short periods of time, hackathons support intensive bursts of creativity. The diverse skills of participants can facilitate innovation and learning due to participants being able to generate and assess ideas from various perspectives. Therefore, hackathon events can be useful for developing solutions within the community.

A statistical profile of Võru county, where most important statistical characteristics of wellbeing are visualized and 'Strategy Plan of Development of Võru County' were shared to all teams in hackathons. During the process of designing new solutions, hackathon teams have to prove the importance of the problem they solve also on the basis of open-data. Mentors and jury were instructed to pay attention to that.

What works

Atmosphere that supports balanced relationships. Social innovation emphasises new relations to be built during its process, and the social hackathon proved to lead to new power patterns as equal positions were deemed crucial by participants in being non-judgemental to one another's perspectives. Mentors play an important role in achieving this by intermediating the co-creation process. Most importantly, non-hierarchical relations take off the pressure to share opinions openly and think creatively.

Mentoring program and worksheets that support better service innovation process for teams during the social hackathon event. It is crucial to design tools (methods, worksheets, canvases) that supports intensive development of any kind of ideas during these 48 hours and help to get teams work more effectively. We worked out guidelines for mentors and mentoring was carefully coordinated during the event.

Communication and networking between the participants during the event. After first hackathon we got feedback, that people in different teams didn't get enough opportunities to communicate with each other during the event. We added more networking and interaction components to the event agenda (overall brainstorming session; check-points method for teams that every time brings together different teams to introduce each other their progress; social events etc). Also, we adapted the rooms and space to allow for closer



communication and interaction (f.e. bigger coffee-break spaces, areas for check-point session with 3-4 teams together).

Branding and attractive image. We created special brand for our social hackathons with main idea: *'We together create the future of Võrumaa'*. We created for social hackathons visual identity and terminology (logo, slogans, fonts, colours etc) that emphasizes the local specificity and highlights the idea of co-creation <https://vunkimano.vorumaa.ee/iii-loometalgud-vorus/>. Our communication style was empowering and optimistic and pointed out importance of everyone. We have created the opportunity for people to take pride in helping the community to find solutions, they feel promoted after participating in social hackathon.

What didn't yet

Main aim of the social hackathon isn't prototyping! Don't expect prototypes or innovative service models. The most important outcomes of a social hackathon are empowerment, trust and new relationships between different stakeholders – the cornerstones that help them to keep on moving together towards the solution after the intensive hackathon event.

Learnings

Vulnerable people and public municipality officials are two groups that are most hard to reach and convince to try hackathon as new method for finding solutions for challenges in our communities. Especially challenging have been to empower vulnerable groups and finding the ways how to reach their networks. In these cases, we found that private communication is more productive than public and social media. Community members, service providers and NGO-s are more open to participate in hackathon and we found that for them social and public media is appropriate channel for communication and dissemination.

Love the problem, not the solution! The most important part of the co-creation process is finding a common understanding of the problem. Getting to know the problem from different angles, co-creating the knowledge about the current situation is crucial for finding sustainable solutions where different stakeholders and end-users are involved.

In the social hackathon, were community members bring to the table their very close problems and development process is very intensive, the emotions are high, and this is a **risk for emotional crises** in teams. Organizers have responsibility to handle these situations gently and carefully to bring teams 'back together'. Mentors must be ready to support not only co-creative service design processes in teams, but also direct development of relationships and the power balance in teams, help to make all the voices heard, mediate contradictions, support teams to find better synergies and collaboration in team.

The social hackathon as a tool needs to be flexible, sensitive and humanistic, considering the needs and abilities of vulnerable participants in terms of the physical, infrastructure and mental support. This intensive format may not be suitable for everyone. While planning the social hackathon, the involvement of more vulnerable groups in the society must be



carefully considered.