Letters ...

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Hackathons and Innovation

Hackathons have come a long way since the first reported use of the term back in 1999 when a group of developers came together in Calgary to avoid legal problems due to export regulations of cryptographic software from the United States. Today, hackathons, hackfests, and hack days are being deployed with great success throughout the life-sciences industry. As we report in this month's cover story, life-sciences companies such as Astellas, LEO Pharma, Johnson & Johnson, Mylan, Novo Nordisk, and Sandoz — to name just a few — are successfully hosting events to come up with rapid, creative, and unexpected solutions to some of today's biggest challenges.

And it's not just big pharma getting into the hackfest game, in February Guidemark Health, a healthcare communications agency, in partnership with CancerCare, held its inaugural H.A.C. (Health Action Community) hackathon event. The all-day mini-hackathon focused on helping those living with metastatic breast cancer (MBC). While the unique needs of people living with MBC are well researched and documented, significant and vast unmet challenges that negatively impact the quality of life remain. Through a collaborative, creative, and diverse group of individuals the goal at the end of the day was to find solutions with the potential to improve the lives of those impacted by MBC and developing a roadmap for bringing the winning solution to market. Guidemark fielded an impressive judging group to review the day's concepts: Carolyn Ricci, advocate and former program director, Avon Breast Cancer Crusade; Christine Verini R.Ph., chief operating officer, CancerCare; Michael Zincone, advocacy and professional relations, Pfizer Oncology; Wayne Sichel, former head, U.S. federal policy, Bristol-Myers Squibb; and Nora Herting, co-founder and CEO, ImageThink. More details about the winning concept to come shortly.

Hackathons are growing in such popularity that MIT Hacking Medicine, which hosts an annual Grand Hack, one of the largest healthcare hackathons in the world, has developed a free Health Hackathon Handbook (http://hackingmedicine.mit.edu/healthcare-hackathon-handbook/) that outlines some of the key components to consider before getting started. The MIT Grand Hack — May 3 - 5 held at the MIT Media Lab — is a weekend event that allows participants to brainstorm and build innovative solutions with hundreds of like-minded engineers, clinicians, designers, developers, and business people across four different category tracks.

In addition to Hackathons, which provide a unique opportunity for creative thinking and access to ideas and expertise, companies of all types and sizes are also engaging in crowdsourcing and developing open innovation models to access external competencies that they may not have internally.

PharmaVOICE would love to hear from you regarding your company's hackathons, hackfests, crowdsourcing, or open innovation programs. Please shoot us an email with details and we would be happy to showcase your program in an upcoming issue.

Taren Grom
Editor

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