Research Weeks

Create Time to Create Change

|  |
| --- |
| **Peter May** |
| *British Library*  *London, UK*  *Peter.May@bl.uk*  *https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8625-9176* |
|  |

**Abstract – Technology companies often run ‘hack weeks’ allowing staff to spend some time exploring new ideas, developing, learning, and collaborating on something of personal interest. The organizational incentive is to reap the benefits derived from allowing such freedom to work on a personal project. This practice has been used within the digital preservation domain before, the AQuA and SPRUCE projects for example, which brought together content holders and developers to quickly develop solutions to content challenges. Inspired by this, the digital preservation team at the British Library undertook a ‘research week’ to enable staff to focus on some digital preservation related work or training they have lacked core time to do; to create time for them to innovate. This poster aims to share our experience, share how we made it happen, and generally open up discussions on digital preservation research and development approaches within organizations.**

**Keywords – Research, Innovation, hack week, training**

**Conference Topics – Community; Exchange**

# Introduction

Technology oriented companies and departments, either formally or informally, often provide scope for employees to spend a portion (typically 10-20%) of their time away from their day-to-day activities and explore some new idea, learn, collaborate, or otherwise work on a personal project they are interested in [1, 2, 3]. A chance for staff to undertake a side project and make progress on those great ideas they just wish they had time for. The incentive for organizations is that it might just lead to the next ‘big thing’, or even just the next ‘little thing’ that brings in more customers, resources, revenue, etc. But 10 or 20% – half-day/one per week – can also be insufficient to make significant headway, especially when context switching away from ‘normal’ work is factored in. Equally, pressure in achieving work goals and not letting down colleagues can also prevent staff from using this allocated ‘hack’ time. One solution to this is to combine all these half-days into one block of focused time, a ‘hack week’ [4].

Hack events are not unheard of in the Digital Preservation community either. The AQuA [5] and SPRUCE [6] projects both ran collaborative multi-day events designed to bring a mixed skillset of individuals to the table to solve collection-specific problems. These events fostered quick and innovative solutions that might not otherwise have been developed, especially if those organizations with the problems did not have the technical capacity to address those challenges; with these hack events, the community as a whole benefits.

The Open Preservation Foundation have also run several hack events dedicated to JHOVE and documentation [7, 8]. These were focused periods of time which brought the community of digital preservation practitioners together to move tasks forwards. By having a dedicated event that collaborators can request to their management to be part of, those participants get a dedicated time to do something they’re interested in and learn something new (albeit focused around a particular tool), as well as a sense of belonging and accomplishment. Their organizations, on the other hand, get improved tools and documentation which hopefully supports their objectives.

No doubt there are other events going on within digital preservation circles, which it would be good to hear about and share experiences on.

# Hack Weeks in Practice

At the British Library, the Digital Preservation Team concern themselves with a variety of tasks devoted to building and supporting digital preservation practice across the Library. We undertake a variety of analytical tasks, as well as research and development activities to develop solutions that meet real-world preservation needs faced by our colleagues. Within our team we have informal arrangements to allow colleagues to spend time on novel ideas or self-driven learning and development opportunities. But, as also faced by staff in the tech companies, actually getting to make use of that time can be challenging when there is so much else to do [9]. So, within the technical arm of our team, we decided to experiment with the equivalent of a ‘hack week’ to allow us dedicated time to undertake some research that each of us have been wanting to do.

During our week, a variety of work was undertaken. The main direction given to staff was that it should relate in some way to the work they were already doing. Some people used it to develop novel technical solutions they had been wanting to work on, others took time to read up about new technologies, others took it further and developed prototypes. For some it was simply a useful time to focus on self-improvement and learn an existing technology applicable to upcoming work.

Running a hack week takes a little more effort than just deciding to do one though. Yes, you need to give people the time, but there are a few other considerations to making it happen and making the week a success.

Foremost, getting buy-in from participants and management is essential. Managers need to understand the benefits of doing this and how it balances with the time spent. This can be hard when participants’ interests extend beyond immediate team goals, and when individual deliverables may be unknown.

It can be especially difficult if you want to run research weeks more than once too. Our current aim is to run these events twice a year. A poorly performing first event can undermine any support gained with management though, so continuation depends on performance, which depends on planning.

A framework is needed for running the week, involving kick-off, catch-ups, and round-up meetings. Participants need supporting in the lead up to the event too. Do they know what’s expected of them? Do they have something to work on? Do they have a plan?

And they need support afterwards. What happens to that new knowledge, that prototype, those new skills once the week has finished? Is it shared across the team/organization? How are ideas taken forward?

Preparation is key.

# Poster

We have two goals with this poster. We want to share our experience of research weeks and why we think they are beneficial, but also to engage with the broader community in a more one-to-one fashion to understand and learn from the experience of others. A poster is an ideal way to have those conversations with iPRES colleagues.

As such, this poster will provide information and talking points surrounding: our motivation for organizing research weeks; challenges we faced in getting started and during the events; the broad framework that we employed to run the week; and how we supported staff in the lead-up, during, and afterwards.

We have another research week planned between now and iPRES and so will have further experience to share.

# REFERENCES

1. “Spotify’s 2021 Hack Week Focuses on “Making Space”, 19 Mar 2021, <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2021-03-19/spotifys-2021-hack-week-focuses-on-making-space/>
2. “Be a force for change: Hack Week 2019”, 17 Dec 2019, <https://blog.dropbox.com/topics/inside-dbx/be-a-force-for-change--hack-week-2019>
3. “Inside Atlassian: Building a culture of innovation”, Dan Garfield, 23 Nov 2015, https://www.atlassian.com/blog/inside-atlassian/how-atlassian-builds-innovation-culture
4. “Organising a hack week”, Joakim Sundén, Spotify R&D, 15 Feb 2013, https://engineering.atspotify.com/2013/02/organizing-a-hack-week/
5. <http://wiki.opf-labs.org/display/AQuA/Home>
6. <http://wiki.opf-labs.org/display/SPR/Home>
7. “JHOVE Online Hack Day Report”, Becky McGuinness, 19 Oct 2016, <https://openpreservation.org/blogs/jhove-online-hack-day-report/>
8. “Spring Hackathon 2020”, <https://openpreservation.org/events/spring-hackathon-2020/>
9. “Side Project Programs Can Have Major Benefits for Employers”, Tammy Xu, 6 Oct 2020, <https://builtin.com/software-engineering-perspectives/20-percent-time>