



THE #VERSUSVIRUS HACKATHON:

A crisis as a real-time open innovation experience

Nothing will make you come up with your best ideas more than being under pressure, running out of time, or having an emergency. Plato's old adage about necessity being the mother of invention has never rung truer than in these days of COVID-19 with the myriad problems that need solving simultaneously across the globe. **Recently, Impact Hub Switzerland created #VersusVirus, a 48-hour online event for programmers, students, mentors, analysts, and anyone motivated to help solve social issues created by the COVID-19 pandemic.**

In order to take action against the effects of the coronavirus crisis, #VersusVirus invited the rest of the world to participate in **the first virtual hackathon ever seen in Switzerland.** In collaboration with the Federal Department of Home Affairs and Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research and in just two weeks the event was planned, promoted, and executed. Their manifesto:



We are looking for daring and innovative ideas that will help Switzerland to show solidarity now and emerge stronger from the current difficult situation caused by the coronavirus...For this to work, the #versusvirus Hackathon needs a strong, diverse community. That means people with very different perspectives and abilities. So you do not need to be a programmer or hacker to contribute.



From **3 April to 5 April**, over **5000 people**, including **26 members of Swiss parliament** and **Federal Council member Alain Berset**, were connected by the internet and a common goal; to solve the COVID-19 crisis. Participants were given **14 topics** to choose from and formed **teams of up to 15 people**. By the end of the weekend, **263 projects** were created (with the support of **over 60 datasets** and resources, and 500 mentors). Of the **192 challenges submitted**, 40 amazing concepts were highlighted by the jury and **given initial funding of CHF1000**. To keep the momentum of the event and see the best projects through to completion, **the winners can then apply for funding of CHF 20,000** for their team and access to a virtual incubation space.

The **14 challenges** created by the diverse group of organizers reflected the areas of society most in need of urgent solutions:

- | | |
|--|--|
|  Protection of Risk Groups |  Education |
|  Dissemination Prevention |  Home Office & Teamwork |
|  Trustable Data vs. Fake News |  After the Crisis |
|  Economic Impact |  Support & Solidarity |
|  Isolation & Mental Health |  Art & Culture |
|  Hospital & Medical Care |  Crime Reduction |
|  Family & Kids |  Other |

With all participants communicating via the collaboration tool **Slack**, the weekend buzzed with Zoom conference calls, Youtube pitches, presentations, and open-source data sets created and shared in real-time among participants using apps such as **opendata.ch**. The spirit of **innovation and inclusion being the driving force of the event**, the live open innovation process was not hindered by its new virtual headquarters.

A hackathon for homework: Geneva Business School students jumped in

As participants and also a proud sponsor, **Geneva Business School** Faculty members and students took up the challenge. **Professors Biliana Vassileva** and **Academic Manager Andrada Maier** and a small group of students took part in #VersusVirus, with the students' projects being graded as part of their academic assessment this semester. **Nikola Mijovic, Elise Durr, and Keshav Astir**, from our Geneva campus, worked on the topic: Food education for all. **Asya-Maria Suveren, Fernanda Magdalena Hildegard Fey, and Jin Gu Lee** worked on a challenge about Isolation and Mental Health. **Ismayil Khuduzade, Aliabbas Shikhaliyev, Javid Safarov, Egor Nogin, Sarp Kerensoyd, and Ibrahim Farhat** took on a topic close to their own personal experience, Education without Infrastructure.

An unforgettable exercise in mentorship

Academic manager Andrada Maier worked on **Passion Vibes**, a project designed to help young students find their passion and pursue it in their professional life. The idea is to create an online platform to connect job seekers with inspiring mentors, webinars, and answer their questions during their job search. **Andrada's team was nominated among the 40 projects that won a CHF1000 prize** at the end of the hackathon weekend and will apply for funding to make their project a reality.



Watch their pitch

Innovation skills-building, beyond the classroom

Our lead educator for Managing Innovation in Geneva, Professor Biliana Vassileva found this unique experience to be transformative in more ways than she expected. As a Leadership Innovation and Change specialist, she is a seasoned hackathoner, with seven years of experience participating in and organizing hackathons. Her impressions of her first virtual hackathon, **"It was such a rich, real, tangible experience, although it was totally intangible...a feeling of total headspace connectedness, of full-on engagement"**.

Biliana found the critical thinking required in this situation to be a perfect learning opportunity, "I try to teach this to the students, quite intensively and that's the key to agile innovation, (is) really playing with a problem for a long time until you decide which one to tackle." She goes on to add, "with innovation it's really important to just really discover what the (actual) problem is you're tackling. Is it the real problem? Because sometimes we think problems are real but in fact, they're not." Biliana believes that **"what matters is the experience, as future managers of innovation, and leaders of innovation."** Participation by her students was offered as an alternative assignment to a class project they had already started work on.

Providing our students with the real-time experience of open innovation, **bringing classroom theory to life can be seen as the silver lining to the cloud cast by this unprecedented event we are watching unfold around the world.** The benefit of living through this experience while simultaneously looking for solutions to it gave the students a practical and visceral way to understand true innovation and the strength to be gained from diverse, global teams and perspectives when creating new concepts and prototypes.

Solving the crisis, one hackathon at a time

The **#VersusVirus Hackathon** idea is indeed spreading across the globe, albeit in a healthy way, with similar events having been held in **Germany**, and another coming up in Canada, more countries are jumping on board. **Impact Hub will be hosting another hackathon in May and June**, and we hope to be there in bigger numbers based on the rich experience reported by our Geneva Business School hackathoners who attended the April event.

If pressure creates diamonds then certainly we are perhaps yet to discover the wealth this global quarantine experience has produced. It seems certain that we are going to see some gems from the #VersusVirus teams in the not too distant future.

