'Hackathons' push worker innovations: The Weather Channel encourages new ideas from employees.

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The idea seems simple enough: be innovative.

A crowd of employees gathered recently near The Weather Channel's Cobb County headquarters vying to pitch ideas for new web or mobile products that are cool. And, hopefully, money-making. A team of two meteorologists, a tech guy and a product leader unveiled an app that predicts conditions for spectacular sunsets and alerts people when to take great photos.

"You can't really do this, right?" one of the competition's judges asked.

Another joked, "Have you considered a partnership with dating apps?"

Silicon Valley is rife with hackathon confabs like this one. Gather any employees who want to participate. Encourage them to break into teams and come up with innovative ideas, fast. Make them pitch to a panel of judges after just a couple days. The winners get glory and maybe some extra money.

Even if you aren't in a tech hotbed, expect to see some version of digital-age brainstorming soon at more workplaces. Companies around the nation are feeling extra pressure to get their innovation on by whatever means necessary, whether its hackathons, prizes for top ideas or innovation labs tasked with cooking up new products or services.

There are plenty of reasons for the pressure, said Steven Olson, a professor of innovation at Georgia State University's Robinson College of Business. Among them: thinning margins, disruptive technology and globalization that has increased the pool of potential rivals.

But Olson said companies often struggle to work around their own bureaucracies and get enough oxygen to employees' new ideas. And he is dubious of efforts like hackathons if they serve only as isolated attempts at innovation.

The businesses he sees as most likely to deeply embrace change are the ones with little choice: those either on their deathbeds or with such a hot hand of innovations that they are under extreme pressure to come up with more. "The hard part is for the (remaining) 80 percent of firms."

"Many companies find it hard to disrupt because that is so against their grain to run lots of experiments knowing that many of them, if not most of them, are going to fail," he said. "That's not going to get you promoted."

Pushing ideas

Several major metro Atlanta corporations have created innovation centers to push fresh ideas forward. Southern Company, parent of Georgia Power, recently launched what it calls the SO Prize (SO is the company's ticker symbol). Employees submitted nearly 1,000 ideas to prepare for the company's future. Winning ideas were chosen by employee voting online and by a panel of executives.

Southern declined to disclose if it paid employees extra for winning ideas, which included using unmanned aircraft to inspect transmission lines.
Holder Construction, a 54-year-old commercial general contractor, created the position of innovation manager three years ago.

"Innovation is such a buzzword," said Danny Owens, who was named to the post. "It's not something where you innovate this month, and we will be set for the next five years. It is an ongoing effort."

Early on, he created an online system for Holder's 700 employees to submit ideas. It unleashed a wave of strong suggestions.

"But participation and enthusiasm started to wane," Owens said. Employees didn't hear much about the implementation of their ideas, and they didn't get to help in the follow-through.

Owens is working on a new system to change that. "We focus the energy and resources around the passionate people who have these ideas."

A few years ago, Chris Huff, who heads mobile development at Weather Channel's parent, The Weather Company, suggested holding a hackathon. The term comes from intense, collaborative sessions used by software programmers to get projects done, often ending in presentations or prototype products.

It was a fallback when Huff couldn't get an infusion of R&D dollars.

'Need to be lean'

Among the company's 1,300 employees are a couple hundred digital developers, and they are encouraged to come up with fresh ideas as part of their regular work. But, Huff said, "everybody's time is over accounted for."

"The name of the game is you need to be lean," he said, adding later, "There's a lot of pent-up innovation in the company."

First prize in the inaugural event went to a team that developed an app incorporating weather conditions into daily workout routines, such as showing personalized information on how weather affects training. Last summer the company launched the free app, called the OutSider.

Rob Hedin, a 47-year-old tech manager who was on the team that worked on the idea, said the event offered freedom for people who think "If they just listen to me once, I can show them how to do these [great] things."

But hackathons often don't produce overnight sensations. The top winner from the 2013 hackathon was an app for TV and desktop that allows personalized live weather feeds and provides historical weather data. It still hasn't been released to consumers.

"The challenge is the quantity of good ideas," said Cameron Clayton, the company's president of product and technology. "You want to see it implemented next week and that's not practical."

The Weather Channel's latest hackathon, held last month, involved nearly 90 employees on more than two dozen teams. It consumed the better part of a week for a big chunk of the company's digital talent.

Sunset app wins

A pair of accountants, Kristen Malcolm and Mark Eastin, won an honorable mention for coming up with a fresh take on a gardening app tied to weather conditions. Other teams came up with other ideas, such as a new way to generate weather alerts for wearables and other connected devices.

But the top prize went to the sunset photo team, with each of the group's four members getting $2,500.

Jason Price, a tech staffer and an amateur photographer, had the idea to predict great sunsets. His teammates searched online and found a world overrun with amateur sunset photos --- some stunning and others blah --- but no app like what they were proposing.

They expect it to be good for the company, which is anxious to build its audience at times when the weather is pleasant.

Two meteorologists in the group came up with weather factors that contribute to exceptional sunsets (for starters, high wispy cirrus clouds and a partial mid-level cloud deck), and they devised an algorithm for the app. Another team member worked on the presentation.

A company spokeswoman said there is interest in turning the idea into a consumer product, but there is no firm plan or timetable yet.
As the sunset team worked, Stu Ostro, a mostly behind-the-scenes Weather Channel forecaster who sometimes goes on the air, gamely wore the company's event T-shirt: "I don't always hack, but when I do... I hackathon."

He admitted later, "I barely knew what a hackathon was until this week."

TOP IDEAS FROM AN EMPLOYEE HACKATHON AT THE WEATHER CHANNEL'S PARENT

1st place: An app that finds ideal weather conditions in the forecast and alerts you when to take a great sunset photo.

2nd place: A new way to generate and send weather alerts for use on any platform, including wearables, connected cars, etc.

3rd place: An effort to optimize coding to save on data usage.

Honorable mentions: A weather-connected app that helps with planning, planting and maintaining a garden; An online page navigation tool for people with disabilities; An idea for tying in donations and philanthropy needs during severe weather.

Employee ideas recognized for the Southern Co.'s SO Prize

Establish a concierge service to increase electric vehicle adoption in the region.

Inspect transmission lines with unmanned aircraft.

Support development of desalination plants using existing rights-of-way for water pipelines.

Allow customers to control power bills by choosing from a "menu of services."

Use data to develop products and services aimed at shifting customer expectations.

Use excess power generating capacity to produce hydrogen for industrial use.

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