



Crafting a Hack Week that people love

How we bring our company together for a week of innovation and team building

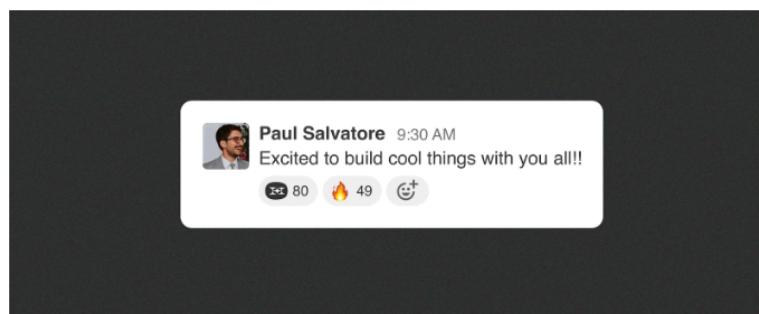


Paul Salvatore · Follow

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Introduction

At [Faire](#), we value the opportunity to innovate through collaboration. Sharing learnings and diverse perspectives is one of the reasons we love bringing folks from different functions and expertise together. Each unique perspective is an opportunity to improve our business and better serve our customers.

Engineers are often familiar with the structure and goals of hackathons, but these can be new concepts to folks from other parts of an organization. When we introduced Hack Week — Faire's annual week-long hackathon — in 2019, we knew that we wanted to build a culture and impact-driven event that everyone across the company could be involved in and look forward to. That meant that we needed to be intentional in how we generated excitement and educated Fairefolk. In this article, we'll share some of the details about how we designed Hack Week to be an engaging event across the company — and drive the most value for Faire.

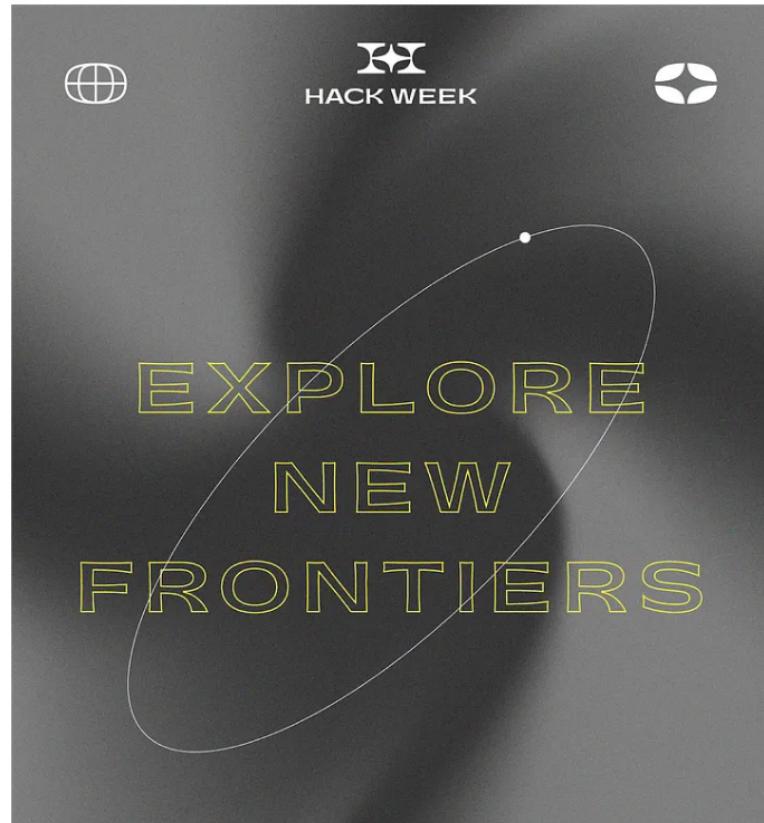
The power (and purpose) of Hack Week

Hack Week is an opportunity for teams to self-organize, self-lead, and produce an impact in ways that are unconstrained by team structures, justification, or resources. It leverages the tremendous talent we have throughout our organization — not just in engineering — and allows individuals to have an outlet to drive impact in the way they see best.

Hack Week adds value in many ways, and that value often lives long beyond the event. That being said, **Hack Week is not free** — setting aside our regular work has an associated cost. However, we believe this cost is justified — we have found that taking mission-aligned people and giving them the opportunity to work on whatever they're passionate about results in immense customer and company value. Here are some of the key benefits of

Hack Week:

- Bringing people together is one of Hack Week's superpowers. Getting to meet and work with people that you might never get a chance to interact with in your daily job creates connections that last long past Hack Week, and helps to strengthen our internal Faire community. People are able to do their jobs more effectively by getting exposure to context holders in different parts of the organization.
- Hack Week is also an opportunity to **create space for personal growth**. It allows individuals to step outside of their comfort zone and exposes people to situations they may not encounter in their regular job. Things like designing features, leading a team, running a demo, and planning a project are all growth opportunities for participants presented in a low-pressure environment.
- If you ask most Fairefolk, they'll probably describe Hack Week as an event that **fosters a culture of fun and innovation**. We encourage people to ask "what if" and follow the thread to exciting new places. It's intentionally low pressure: if your idea doesn't go anywhere, that's okay, the act of exploring it and making connections along the way is a reward all in itself. We want people to look forward to Hack Week and think about projects throughout the year leading up to it. We want people to feel invested in finding ways to continuously improve as a company, by building a culture of ownership.
- Finally, **Hack Week creates a ton of value for both our company and our customers**. Creating a project that will live past Hack Week isn't the first goal of Hack Week, but it's an awesome secondary effect. Projects that come out of Hack Week are often huge swings that explore exciting new problems in creative ways. Prototyping done during Hack Week can also help to derisk large projects and reveal opportunities to serve our customers better.





During Hack Week, the entire company focuses on exploring new frontiers — for Faire, for our customers, and anything else you can think of.

Who should own Hack Week?

Running a successful Hack Week first comes down to the team planning it — and it's important to bring in a wide range of perspectives and backgrounds. Our planning team brings together excited and passionate individuals from across the organization, including Engineering, Marketing, Design, Brand Success, and more. People volunteer to help organize the event because they're excited about building something for our community.

Sharing ownership of Hack Week helps when engaging the different parts of the organization and creates a diversity of ideas, perspectives, and skills in the planning process. We play to each other's strengths — we pull in design partners who are especially skilled at **creating a strong brand** around the event, just as we would for a product launch. Branding is an important tool when educating folks about the event and building a culture around it. On the other side, our sales partners know how to **generate hype and drive action**, and help us spread the word and drive team creation. Everyone involved has an important role to play.

Use categories to set the direction of the projects

Next, it's important to encourage the right amount of focus on specific topics and themes. While Hack Week teams can focus on any topic, prizes are awarded to the best project in each Hack Week category to encourage folks to focus on specific themes. A Hack Week category serves as a nudge in the ideation phase. We want the event to be intentionally open-ended to allow passionate individuals to follow their gut, but we also want to give resources to help individuals who thrive in solving problems with more constraints. A part of inclusivity is creating space for both of these approaches.

Some past categories have included:

- *Cutting-edge ML using GPT-3*: a category with a more specific constraint aimed to build targeted knowledge in our teams
- *Improvements to Faire's quality*: something extremely and intentionally open-ended to guide teams in a non-prescriptive way

Categories are also great tools to build buy-in from different parts of the organization. For example, in the past, we've included categories like "Projects that identify overlooked margin opportunities" to engage the finance team and signal to the organization the different ways that they can participate.

Hack Week starts well before the event

As we lead up to the week there are three major categories of tasks that need to be owned and accomplished for a successful Hack Week: ideation, team creation, and building hype.

Ideation

We found that **ideation** is a critical piece of a successful Hack Week. Not all folks will be around to participate in Hack Week, and not everyone will want to participate, but that doesn't mean they don't have great ideas. Having a central place (we use a Notion database) where anyone can share ideas and teams can form around those ideas is a way to both make Hack Week more inclusive and also leverage as many great ideas as possible.

The prime directive of brainstorming is there are no bad ideas, so we encourage anything and everything. "Faire but for dogs" might not be a winning idea, but "Faire curated by more specific categories i.e. dogs" has clear business value. Leaning into the wacky ideas helps to get the creative juices flowing to find ideas that will add value to Faire.

Team creation

To make the most of their time during Hack Week, we ask individuals to **create their teams** and know what they will be working on ahead of time. As organizers, we wear many hats including promoter, recruiter, and arbitrator during the team creation phase.

Our policy is that anyone who wants a team and can't find one will get help being placed into one that they'll be excited about. Most people end up finding teams on their own, but to some people — especially those that do not typically work in product development — this can be a challenging experience. That's why we make it as easy as possible to participate. We provide support for individuals who are having trouble finding a team and work with them to discuss their interests and match them to relevant teams. We also talk with teams and educate them on the value of including multidisciplinary roles in their projects.

Sometimes people are so excited about an idea that they gain attention from a huge group. These mega-teams are great (they signal passion for an idea!) but as the organizers, it's our job to step in to make sure they will be successful. Organizing a team of thirty people is incredibly difficult, so the question we ask is "Do you think you will be able to use all of these resources effectively?" If they can, then that's great — we love ambitious projects. If they aren't sure, then we nudge them to break their team up to a manageable size and set a cap.

Building hype

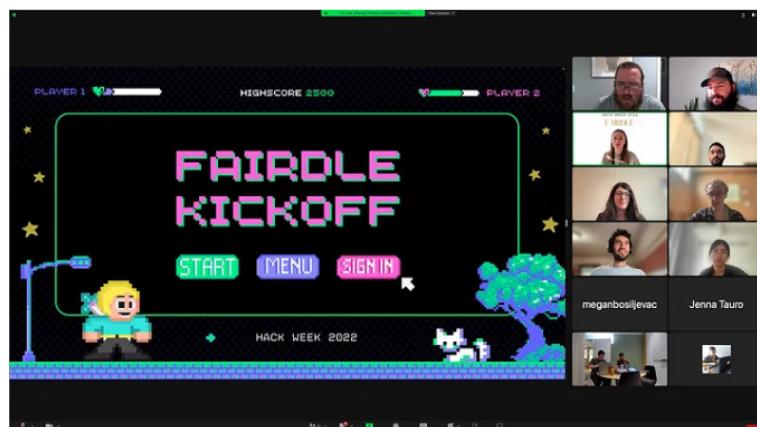
When it comes to **building hype**, nothing beats keeping a constant drumbeat to keep the event top of mind. As the organizers, we become Mr/Ms/Mx Hack Week. We leave no opportunity on the table to promote the event — from chatting with folks in person at lunch, in 1-on-1s, at the company all hands, at team syncs, and during stand-ups. We create spaces like Slack channels for people to share ideas and build off each other's energy. The more people think about the event, the more they will think of great ideas.

This is also the time to leverage leadership to help spread the message. Having leaders from our organization reaffirm the goals and expectations (and even join teams) helps to set the tone for the event and reinforces company-wide investment into Hack Week.

A key part of building excitement, however, is taking away barriers that prevent folks from getting involved. Education is a major focus area at this stage — we teach folks unfamiliar with Hack Week how to pick or create a project, how to participate, and how to run a successful team.

We try to find ways to make the event feel special

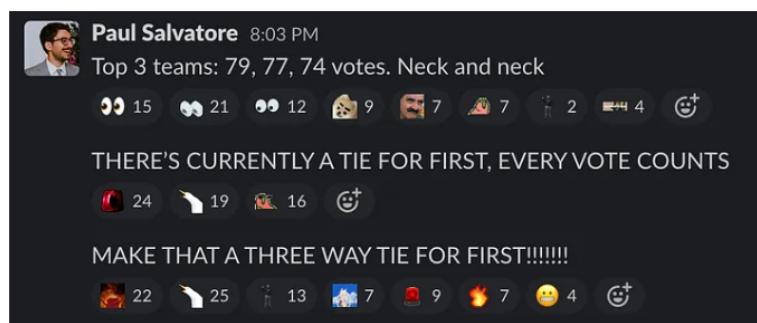
If we've done our job ahead of time, when Hack Week gets underway teams should be autonomous — that means we can focus on building culture around the event.



A Hack Week team kicks off project planning in style.

Finding ways to encourage participation, like sharing team photos, can bring a personal element to the event, especially for remote folks. We also host a variety of social activities like album listening parties, pitch games, and group brainstorms — these events create spaces for fun and laughter and give folks who might not want to get involved in a project the chance to still participate in the event.

Having a demo fair-type event, whether in person or remote, is a great way for teams to mingle and get exposure to all of the work that was done during the week. For our demo fair, we ask teams to record short easily consumable video demos about their projects. This helps make reviewing the projects easy, and also provides a concrete artifact of the project so when a PM wants to dig it up in the future the context is all self-contained. This is also where folks get to vote for who they get to see pitch their projects in our finale.



The voting process heats up on Slack during Hack Week.

Our Hack Week culminates with live demos from the top-voted teams from our demo fair. The teams make their final pitches, and the company votes on a crowd favorite which is presented alongside the winners of the categories for that year. Bringing everyone together, whether online or in person, to share all the hard work, creativity, and innovation that stemmed from the week, is always energizing and celebratory for the entire company. Every year the bar is raised, and we are blown away by the results.



Teams get creative with their Hack Week project presentations in order to help drive votes.

Little things that improve the Hack Week experience all year long

Taking time to evaluate what worked, and what didn't, and continuing to improve and evolve the event is critical to its longevity. We retro Hack Week just as we would a product launch, and try to always create an even more impactful and engaging Hack Week than the previous year.

For example, two years ago, we learned the value of a great slackmoji, so we stepped up our slackmoji game this year (see the animated Hack Week “H” in the image at the top of this article!). Seeing a crazy idea posted in July reacted to with our Hack Week logo, months away from the event, is a great indicator that people are identifying with the purpose of the event, and carrying that with them throughout the year. This year we even had folks organically offer help desk-style services in marketing, engineering, and design — and got a tremendous response! Next year we intend to formalize these services as a part of Hack Week.

As organizers, we're grateful for the opportunity and space to bring people together and innovate as an organization. Each year the results of Hack Week blow us away, and being a part of crafting that impact and experience for the company is hugely rewarding.

If working at a company that values innovation and building a strong cross-functional culture excites you, let's chat — or [visit our careers page](#) to learn more about open roles at Faire.

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Written by Paul Salvatore

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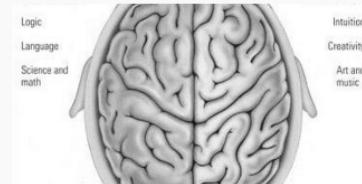


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