

The Datathon and how to make the most of it



There are hundreds of **definitions** for the term **Data Scientist**... Fancy *Venn Diagrams* (like [this one](#) or [this one](#)), *radial charts* with a ridiculous number of skills (like [the one here](#)), multi-dimensional highly complicated charts (like [that one](#)), carefully elaborated *infographics* (like [this one](#) or [this one](#)) ... and of course hundreds of prose lines try to explain what this *rara avis*, *this mythological creature*, *this unicorn* does.

What really defines a data scientist is his/her unconditional love for data. The feeling of exploring new data sets, of discovering patterns, correlations... the moment the first visualizations create those "Aha!" moments... the first time you apply your trained model to the test data set... These feelings are damn close to getting butterflies in the stomach... That's what defines a data scientist.

A **Datathon** is the place where Data Scientists come to "work-out", to release these endorphins and share it with other Data Lovers. It's like a standard *Hackathon*, usually in the same format, but

where the main character is the data.

Motivated for the upcoming [Telefónica Data Challenge](#), where I'm going to be on the other side (-unfortunately- in the jury, not as a participant), I'd like to share a few **tips for Datathon participants**, to make the most of the event.

Ten Tips to make the most of your Datathon

1. You are not a nerd-looking male programmer? It doesn't matter

You don't need to be a demographic researcher to know that the typical hackathon participants are [predominantly mid-to-upper class white males](#). Yet, this fact shouldn't prevent you from joining... On the contrary, a hacking event is proven to be a great experience [especially for women in the tech industry](#).

It is [not only about being a good developer](#), you can participate as a *non-tech person* and play a decisive role in your team, such as presenter, the one who bridges between developers and UX engineers, conducting Users Research, doing time keeping, etc... The learning experience pays definitively off.

2. Adhere to the Code of Conduct and don't forget to be kind

My expectation is, that these conduct rules are kind of obvious for all participant: anti-harassment policy, privacy preserving rules applying to photographs, etc... Just in case you want to have a read, [this article](#) offers a short and a long version of it.

Be kind to the staff hosting it... Many of them are just volunteering to learn something... just like you... Also keep in mind, that the staff hosting the event has been putting a lot of efforts since months so that you can focus on what you love... Make them feel proud of their baby... and if something doesn't work as planned, be supportive and help these guys finding a solution!

3. Identify the typology of your project

The more teams participating, the higher the chance of seen several of these projects: Mashups, polished and over-polished projects, cutting-edge research technologies, etc... [This article](#) provides a good overview... knowing your kind of project upfront allows for staying focus on the delivery while sharpen your competitive USPs.

Changing your project type is not a big drama, but the sooner you go for the right one, the higher the chance to deliver something decent. :)

4. Be a good citizen, your competitors and you love the same stuff!

Don't miss the opportunity of offering some mentoring to other hackers! Engage with them! The event is much more than just a simple competition... It's a *learning experience* and a place where people with your interests try to "hack" something together -just like you-. Take the chance to *expand your community*, offer and get help and to interact with as many people as you can.

5. Define your own "Hackathon toolbox"

Don't limit yourself to your comfort zone, to the tools you master, to the visualizations you already know... Open up and learn! A hackathon is a good opportunity to *expand horizons*, to try something new. On the other hand, make sure you can be productive quickly and the learning curve does not prevent you from delivering something. Defining your own "*Hackathon toolbox*" in advance is certainly meaningful (for example, [this one](#))

6. Don't focus on prizes - Focus on creativity

If you just participate for the prizes, you are doing your hack a disservice... It's about creativity, passion and learning experiences... Don't add up functionality just to look good in the sponsor's eyes.. this is like betraying the essence of the event, choose what your creativity drive asks you to go for! *Hack as no one is watching you!* :)

7. Perfectionists don't survive

Delivering something that more or less work and selling a vision is far more important than creating a robust industrial product 3 months after the event... Remember the "*F*ck it, ship it!*" approach... In Hackathons the agile development methodology works best: define and deliver a [Minimum Viable Product](#) (MVP) and iterate -if you have enough time- on the features that add the highest value to your project!

8. Don't fall into the tunnel vision trap

For sure you are going to have bugs... be creative in handling them... a new fresh pair of eyes, googling, asking people around or simply attempting new ways of solving the problem might bring you forward... Don't allow yourself to get stuck. A Hackathon puts to the test your survival skills... that's the beauty of that!

9. A Datathon is meant for teams - be a team player

Leave philosophical discussions such as "*R is better than Python*" -OMG, How I like this discussion!- outside... We all love these discussions, but in a Hackathon is not about arguing, but finding as a team a creative and innovative way of solving the challenge.

Make sure your team size is not too big, otherwise the overhead of coordinating the different players is too high, taking time away from the actual prototyping.

10. Time for the truth: make a superb demo

After many hard-working hours, it's [time to present your baby](#) to the jury! The way you do that can make a huge difference, so better read carefully these lines and learn from these advices:

1. Set the scene: just make the audience aware of the problem you are solving and how big is the difference vs. status quo you are making. *Don't sell your product! Sell the problem you are solving!*

2. Present a *working project*: don't be reluctant of showing off commenting the technical challenge you solved, but skip parts not adding any value (such as entering user and password)... Do it just in the time you've be allocated and focus on how your product solve the problem.

3. Wrap it up and *sell the dream*: your chances of winning increase with the size of your dream! summarize what you have achieved and what your mid-/long-term vision is. Always accent the difference you are making

4. Create an *outstanding online presentation*: creating a modern looking html presentation of your project, if possible including rich media (videos, testimonials, etc), a log-book with your findings, the problem statement you are solving and how you tackled it gives your project much more exposure, even after the challenge... you are going to love looking back at it when everything is over.

There are also hackathons where instead of having the contestants presenting one by one on the stage, follow an *expo format*, with stands and jury tours [to foster the community building](#). The same rules apply in this case as well. And remember, whatever happens, never deliver a Power Point! Your demo needs to be live and playable!

Wrapping Up

Just be very careful, because Data Challenges and other Hackathons can be highly addictive... Sooner than you think, you can end up running out of free week-ends... traveling to other cities to find the best events, spending long hours during the week to get well prepared...

In certain ways, you share the same habits of a marathon runner... that's the "*-thon*" part in the **Datathon**

Final words

The *Telefónica Data Challenge* Organization Team ([Elena](#), [Esperanza](#), [Alex](#), Nanne, [Sebastian](#), Wolfgang, etc) has been doing an amazing job to make an incredible event a reality! If you happen to be in the Munich area this week-end, [get registered and join us!](#) It's going to be worth it, I can guarantee it!... And don't worry, you are not going to miss the UEFA EM 2016... we are going to be watching Germany playing Italy LIVE on Saturday!