

Mentor Handbook

Your guide to supporting VET hackathon teams

01 Welcome and Purpose

This handbook is your practical companion as a mentor at a DigiCollab hackathon. Whether you are joining as an industry professional, an educator, or a community expert, your role is one of the most important in the event. You will not be teaching – you will be guiding. The distinction matters enormously.

This guide covers everything you need: what to expect, how to structure your sessions, which techniques to draw on in different situations, how to handle challenges, and what success looks like from a mentor's perspective.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Great mentors guide without solving, question without judging, and inspire without directing. Their role is to make teams smarter – not dependent.

Who attends a DigiCollab hackathon?

DigiCollab hackathons bring together VET (Vocational Education and Training) students aged 16–25 from schools and training institutions across Germany, Italy, and Turkey. Many participants have not taken part in a hackathon before. They arrive with genuine curiosity but may feel uncertain about what is expected of them. As a mentor, your calm, supportive presence sets the tone.

What mentors are NOT responsible for

You are not a teacher, a judge (unless specifically asked), or a problem-solver for hire. You will not be evaluating teams during the main event – that is the jury's role. You are a thinking partner and guide.

02 The Mentor Role and Responsibilities

As a mentor, you will be assigned to a rotation of two to three teams, visiting each team for 45–60 minutes before rotating. You will also be available for drop-in questions between rotations.

Your role at a glance	Details
Rotation schedule	45–60 minutes per team, cycling across 2–3 assigned teams
Availability	Between rotations: open 'office hours' at a designated mentor table
Coordination	Brief team huddles with other mentors: mid-Day 1, end of Day 1, Day 2 morning
Documentation	Complete a Mentor Session Log after each team visit (see Annex)
Reporting	Escalate welfare concerns or persistent team dysfunction to a facilitator immediately

Mentor Session Structure

Each visit should loosely follow three phases. The structure is a guide, not a script – follow the team's energy.

Phase	Duration	What to do
Opening	5 min	Arrive with positive energy. Read the room. Ask: 'Where are you in your process?' and 'What's been the hardest thing since we last spoke?' Then: 'What would be most helpful to focus on today?'
Main conversation	30-40 min	Draw on whichever mentor mode the team needs. Prioritise questions over statements. Offer multiple options rather than one answer. Share real-world context when relevant. If scope is a problem, name it gently.
Close	5-10 min	Summarise what the team has decided or committed to. Express genuine confidence: 'I think you're on a strong track.' Log this visit immediately after leaving the team.

03 Effective Mentoring Techniques

Different teams need different kinds of support at different moments. The table below outlines four mentor modes and when to use each.

Mode	When and how to use it
Socratic Questioner	Team has ideas but has not thought them through. Ask probing questions rather than offering answers. 'What problem exactly are you solving?' / 'Who specifically would use this?'
Technical Expert	Team is stuck on a specific technical challenge they do not have the expertise to solve alone. Share concrete approaches and tools, but still offer options rather than a single prescription.
Reality Checker	Scope is too ambitious. Gently but clearly name the gap: 'You have 6 hours. If I were you, I would focus on one core feature and call everything else version 2.'
Encourager	Team is losing motivation or confidence. Name what you genuinely observe as progress. 'The struggle you're feeling is exactly where the best solutions come from.'
Contextualiser	Team needs real-world framing. Share analogous examples, case studies, or your own professional experience — but briefly and in service of the team's thinking, not your own expertise.
Facilitator	Team dynamics are an obstacle. Redirect constructively. 'I'd really like to hear from everyone — what are you each working on right now?'

TIP

The single most common mistake mentors make is giving the answer instead of asking the question. When you catch yourself about to say 'You should do X', convert it to: 'What do you think would happen if you tried X?'

Situation-Response Guide

Concrete responses for the most common situations you will encounter.

Situation	Mentor response
Team has strong momentum	Encourager + Contextualiser: 'This is excellent. One thing to consider as you refine it: [specific suggestion].'
Stuck on a technical problem	Technical Expert: 'Here are three ways to approach this... This one is quickest for a prototype; this one is more robust.'
Scope too ambitious	Reality Checker: 'Love the ambition. You have 6 hours. Focus on [core feature] and park the rest for version 2.'
Lacking direction	Socratic Questioner: 'Let's step back. What problem are you solving? Good. Now, who specifically experiences that problem?'
Team dynamics issues	Facilitator: 'I notice most of the talking has come from one direction. I'd like to hear from everyone.'
Discouraged or losing motivation	Encourager: 'I hear the frustration. Here's what I actually see: solid user research, a clear problem, real iteration.'

04 Mentor Do's and Don'ts

✓ Mentors do...	✗ Mentors avoid...
✓ Ask more questions than you give answers	✗ Solve the problem for the team
✓ Listen actively before advising	✗ Dominate the conversation or impose your solution
✓ Offer multiple options and let the team choose	✗ Dismiss or discourage ideas prematurely
✓ Share real-world experience and context	✗ Get so technical the team cannot follow
✓ Adapt your approach to what the team needs	✗ Make teams feel bad for their progress level
✓ Report serious team dynamics issues to facilitators	✗ Mentor teams you will also be judging
✓ Be available between rotations for drop-in questions	✗ Promise resources you are not certain you can deliver
✓ Complete your session log after each visit	✗ Disappear between rotations without telling a facilitator

05 Fostering Creativity and Innovation

One of your most valuable contributions is helping teams break out of conventional thinking. Many VET students default to safe, predictable solutions when working under pressure. The following tools can help.

Ideation techniques mentors can introduce

Technique	How to use it
5 Whys	State the problem. Ask 'Why?' and take the answer. Repeat five times. The fifth answer is usually the root cause. Use when a team is addressing surface symptoms only.
SCAMPER	Substitute / Combine / Adapt / Modify / Put to other use / Eliminate / Reverse. Apply each prompt to the challenge. Breaks conventional thinking.
Crazy 8s	Fold paper into 8 sections. Set an 8-minute timer. Sketch a different idea in each section – one per minute. Forces volume before quality.
'Yes, And...'	Every response to an idea must start with 'Yes, and...' and add to it. No 'but' or 'actually'. Save evaluation for the convergent phase.
Assumption Testing	List every assumption the solution depends on. Rank by risk. Design the smallest possible test for the riskiest one.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Teach teams to fall in love with the problem, not their first solution. The best solutions emerge from deep problem understanding, not from rushing to build the most technically impressive thing.

Resources you can share with teams

Type	Examples
Technical	API documentation, tutorial sites, code examples, design inspiration galleries, tool recommendations.
Conceptual	Case studies of analogous solutions, research articles, framework guides, user research templates, business model canvases.
Connections	Industry expert contacts, potential implementation partners, related initiatives, post-hackathon funding opportunities.

06 Supporting Team Dynamics

Hackathons put strangers together under time pressure. Some friction is healthy. Your role is to ensure it does not become dysfunctional.

Challenge	Mentor response
One person dominates	Structured turn-taking: 'I'd like to hear from everyone. Let's go around.' Silent ideation first, then share.
Conflict between members	Stay neutral. Focus on the situation, not individuals. Ask: 'What does the team need to move forward?' Escalate if it continues.
Team has no direction	Help them write a single-sentence problem statement. 'We are building [X] for [user] because [insight] so that [outcome].'

Over-ambitious scope	Ask: 'What would version 0.1 look like?' Focus them on a testable minimum viable prototype.
Someone disengaged	Assign them a specific task. Check in one-on-one if possible. Notify facilitators if you suspect a welfare concern.
Team about to give up	Reframe. Acknowledge the difficulty. Name real evidence of progress. Remind them: 'Every team goes through this!'

 **TIP**

Most team problems stem from poor communication, unclear roles, or insufficient structure – not from incompatible personalities. Address the situation early and you rarely need to escalate.

07 Specialist Mentor Roles (Optional)

For larger events, the following specialist roles can be assigned in addition to standard rotations.

Role	Description
Roving Mentor	Not assigned to a rotation. Available for urgent questions and technical troubleshooting across all teams. Best filled by someone with broad technical knowledge.
Presentation Coach	Works with teams on Day 2 to shape and rehearse their final presentation. Focuses on storytelling and pitch structure rather than content.
Domain Expert	Deep knowledge of a specific theme (sustainability, inclusion, digital literacy). Available for consultation to validate approaches and provide specialist context.

08 Mentor Coordination

Three brief check-ins keep the mentor team aligned across the event.

Check-in	Purpose
Mid-Day 1 huddle (10–15 min)	Review team progress across all teams. Flag concerns. Identify any team that needs additional support on Day 1 afternoon.
End-of-Day 1 debrief (15–20 min)	What worked? What did teams struggle with? Plan Day 2 support priorities. Agree which teams need special attention tomorrow.
Day 2 morning sync (10 min)	Final-push priorities. Agree presentation coaching needs. Confirm who is covering which teams in the final sprint.

 **TIP**

Use the Mentor Session Log (Annex) to record each visit. This is not bureaucracy – it helps the whole organising team maintain visibility and ensures no team falls through the gaps.

09 Mentor Session Log

Complete this log after each team visit. A printable version is available in the Annex. Use it to track what was discussed, what the team committed to, and anything the organising team needs to know.

MENTOR SESSION LOG	
Team	
Mentor	
Date / Time	
Current status	<i>What is the team working on?</i>
Discussion highlights	<i>Key points covered in this session</i>
Challenges identified	<i>Obstacles, blockers or concerns noted</i>
Guidance provided	<i>Advice, frameworks or resources shared</i>
Follow-up needed	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Technical resources</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Expert connection</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Scope adjustment</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Team dynamics</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Other: ____</i>
Next steps for team	<i>What did the team commit to doing next?</i>
Notes for facilitators	<i>Anything the organising team should know?</i>
Team confidence level	● <i>High</i> ● <i>Medium</i> ● <i>Low</i>