Three Essays on Hacking

Introduction

We’re running a panel session at the MRS 2014 conference on the theory and practice of hacking. During the session we will explore how hacking relates to research, how it works in different organisation and how to hack successfully. In advance of the session we wrote three blog posts working through these themes. We have brought them together and hope you find them thought provoking and useful. If you do, and want to talk more, please get in touch.

Essay 1 | Hack this, hack that

‘Hacking’ is a difficult term to pin down. From a means of illegally accessing voicemails, to shorthand for infiltrating high-security state apparatus, hacking is a word that has attracted a variety of negative associations.

But I’d like to discuss one of its more positive incarnations: namely hacking as an approach to innovation. In this context the term has come to be associated with some specific behaviours:

- Working at speed: getting a real product out there as fast as possible, because the best laid business plans always change
- Doing not talking: making something tangible, not discussing hypotheticals
- Failing fast: improving your product rapidly based on real world feedback, not theory

Hacking goes mainstream

Like many good ideas, hacking started at the fringes of culture; a group of people setting out to change the world from outside of the system. But over the last few decades the success of Silicon Valley businesses who are built around the ‘hacker culture’ (e.g. Google) has alerted the wider commercial world to the promise of hacking
Now traditional companies like McDonald’s are staging hackathons, while businesses across the spectrum are looking to hire the best ‘growth hackers’. The very system the early hackers were deliberately circumventing is now integrating hacking into ‘business as usual’.

While there is no doubt that some organisations will benefit from adopting the hacker culture straight away, it won’t fit so well with others. The question is not so much whether to adopt the hacking approach, but where, when and why?

In the Signal and The Noise, Nate Silver pointed out the difference between Hedgehogs and Foxes. Hedgehogs are people who have a single theory they use to explain the world. Foxes are less ideological in their outlook – they borrow from different theories depending on what it is they are trying to explain.

**Hacking isn’t a silver bullet**

Predictably, the same is true with hacking. It’s a useful approach, but we should avoid seeing it as a silver bullet, guaranteed to instil the entrepreneurial dynamism of a tech start-up into every organisation it touches.

- **Your speed is framed by your product**: most businesses still make physical products, not digital ones. Many of these products are very difficult to ‘hack’ meaningfully without significant investment. For these organisations it’s worth spending time thinking carefully where to focus before unleashing the hacker ethos.
- **Your ability to do not talk is framed by your skillset**: it’s easy to foster a hacker culture if your organisation is filled with engineers, designers and developers – not so much if you’re long on analysts, accountants and administrators. The skill here is to reframe ‘doing’ within the skills that are available, or bring them in from outside.
- **Your capacity to fail fast is framed by what’s at stake**: a business may be risk averse because it operates in a highly regulated industry or because it has a (quite normal) intolerance of failure. For such a business a top down dictate to ‘fail fast’ won’t have an impact, unless a safe, walled environment for failure is created first.

Having run over 50 hacking projects for clients big and small, our experience suggests the answer is to experiment with hacks: testing how each organisation can most benefit from hacker culture. In our experience all organisations can benefit, but do so in different ways.
Essay 2  |  Hack culture and the death of strategic research?

A new research paradigm

Over the last decade consumer research has been pushed to play an increasingly strategic role within organisations (Boston Consulting Group: 2009). Over this period trends such as co-creation have taken the old adage that the ‘customer is always right’ to its logical conclusion; positioning consumer research at the forefront of corporate strategy. Significant and costly investigations into consumer worlds are now regularly used to drive business strategy.

But is all this about to change? The spread of ‘hacking culture’ seems to represent a paradigm shift for big organisations, with its emphasis on speed, agility and entrepreneurialism. And on the face of it the research industry has some real reasons to be fearful. Exhortations to ‘experiment’, ‘fail fast’ and ‘launch in beta’ are core components of the hacker creed, all of which undermine the logic of conducting predictive, extensive and theoretically grounded consumer research studies.

In this new context research is relegated to the role of tactical product testing: analysing real world data to substantiate the next product iteration or pivot. The idea that you would invest significantly in consumer research before launching something tangible would seem absurd to a hacker. After all, we all know by now that predicting consumer behaviour is notoriously difficult - so why waste the money?

Hacking can lead to half-baked strategic thinking

Having said this, the adoption of hacker culture could be as much a step backwards as it is a step forwards. A world in which risk taking, experimentation and unfettered enterprise are celebrated is arguably precisely the world that organisations sought to mitigate with consumer research.

The real risk is that hack culture is misused within big organisations. In the wrong hands it can become an excuse for shoddy thinking and ill-considered strategy. An executive with a pet idea can force it to market under the cover
of buzz words of ‘beta testing’ and ‘lean startup’, potentially wasting millions in the process (after all, not all products are made in digital).

*In short, the impulse to hack can become an excuse not to do sufficient thinking, planning or research up front.*

And the signs of a backlash are already upon us: the term ‘failure porn’ is now being used to describe the increasingly mindless celebration of those who have failed, simply because they had the guts to try something out (and the connected assumption that we will necessarily learn something from their failure).

**Thrashing by any other name**

So where does this leave us? Seth Godin makes a useful distinction between ‘thrashing’ and ‘shipping’, which helps to highlight a path forward. In his vernacular, thrashing is about deciding what to do, and shipping is about doing it. His key message is about the importance of ‘thrashing early’ i.e. thinking very carefully about what it is you are going to focus on – because once you’ve decided you’re all in; it’s time to ship.

Research is what you do when you’re thrashing: it’s about taking the time and making the space to think deeply about your organisation, your market and customers and setting your strategy. It’s about charting a course, creating a strategy and developing the right brief. And then once you’ve decided what to ship, you start hacking.

Godin – a lynchpin of Silicon Valley – is effectively arguing that strategic research is more important than ever, not less. The culture of hacking demands a strong strategic focus and the clarity that thoughtful and insightful research delivers. Because if you get your strategy wrong, then you could become committed to shipping yourself to ruin.

**Essay 3 | 5 lessons on how to hack in big organisations**

Between *Good For Nothing* (the global hack network, co-founded by Stripe Partners’ Tom Rowley), and *Made In Lambeth* (the South London hack network run by Tom Hoy), we have organised and run over 50 hack-style sessions for everyone from councils and charities, to consumer goods companies and fashion
brands. Two organisations we’ve worked with recently, Lambeth Council and the charity YouthNet, are speaking with us on their experiences of hacking at the MRS conference 2014.

In preparation for the conference we’ve been having a think about what we’ve learned from running these hack sessions over the last couple of years, and summarised them into some key principles which can be broadly applied to any experimentations with hacking:

1. **Focus on the right (strategic) challenge**

One of the main differences between success and failure in hacking is whether you’ve understood its capabilities within the context of your organisations strategic priorities, and managed to get broad buy-in to the approach.

This requires research and negotiation. If you enter into a hack without really thinking through your priorities or attempting to get agreement on them, then, more often than not, you will see a lot of energy and creativity expended for nothing.

2. **Hone your level of ambition**

Once you’ve identified the challenge, don’t think hacking will be a silver bullet. Hacking often fails because of a lack of understanding how to get the most out of the approach. For example, it is a common misconception that a hack approach necessitates a lack of structure. In fact, failing to invest enough time honing the brief before instigating a hack is a recipe for disaster.

The key is getting a brief which is pitched at the right level. Make it too strategic and ambitious and the outputs will be intangible and difficult to move forward. Make the brief too tactical and prescriptive and you will shut down creativity and end up with predictable results.

3. **Get the right people in the room**

When you think about hacks your mind wanders to computer engineers and software developers. These skill-sets are absolutely right for some challenges, but as hacking moves into mainstream organisations (which often produce non-digital products) skill requirements change.
So if the challenge requires storytelling, you might recruit an author. If the challenge involves creating packaging, you might recruit a sculptor. Crucially, while the personnel may revolve, the philosophy and approach to hacking remains the same.

4. Add some competition

For a hack to be worth doing it has to have ‘hack value’. Hack value is generated as much by the process of hacking as it is by the outcome: “performing feats for the sake of showing that they can be done, even if others think it is difficult.

Despite its deep sense of community, the success of hacking culture rests, in part, on the need of participants to demonstrate their “finesse, cleverness or brilliance”. It is this underlying competitive spirit is what spurs on hackers: the desire to demonstrate your smarts and skills to other people you respect.

Therefore when you design your hack – whether it is a one-day event or on-going product development programme – harnessing the power of competition will make a big difference to the quality of the outcome.

5. Assign proper ownership

We have run dozens of hacks for organisations who were keen to experiment with the approach. The most successful all have one thing in common: they were not treated as one-off events by their sponsors, but as a starting point for deeper organisational change. You could tell which organisations were serious by the fact that certain employees took personal responsibility of the process and the output – it was not seen as something external to the organisations, but something that needed to be taken on internally.

Ultimately hack-sessions are just the tip of the iceberg: a toe dipped in the water. To be truly effective, hacking is a philosophy that must be adopted across an organisation. A willingness to experiment, work at speed and fail fast is not something that will happen overnight. There is no getting around it: creating commitment to a new process takes serious leadership and significant resources.