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MIT Hackathon Seeks to Improve Assistive Tech

An annual MIT sprint pairs students and community members to create technology solutions for those with disabilities.

by Erin Brereton

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

MIT's annual Assistive Technology Hackathon, pairs students with individuals who have disabilities to create innovative, technology-based solutions for their challenges.

This year's winner of the **Functionality Prize** was a wearable armband that vibrates to alert a person with impaired hearing that the doorbell is ringing. A portable chair device, created to help an individual comfortably use a shower when traveling, nabbed a Co-Designer Collaboration Prize.

Some participants choose to share their designs online for others to replicate. One group, which created a device that allows a co-designer with cochlear implants to use wired and wireless earbuds, published its work on the DIY Instructables platform.

Along the same lines, ATHack organizers have compiled a database of hackathon projects, which they hope to share online in the next few months.

"After every event, we've added all the projects to the website. It's usually just a short description," says Jaya Narain, a doctoral student at MIT who helped launch ATHack as an undergrad. "We asked teams this year to submit sketches of what they were working on. We're compiling it in a way for **someone else who has a similar challenge to use.**"

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Approximately **75 students** worked on 15 projects at this year's ATHack, held **March 3** at the MIT Lincoln Laboratory Beaver Works Center in Cambridge, Mass. By the end of the event, eight or nine of those projects were complete, says Narain.

Given the 11-hour timeframe, the founders of the ATHack don't expect participants to produce usable products by the end of the event, says Narain. But because participants — who may be students, designers or community members — first meet at a dinner two weeks beforehand, many arrive at the event ready to go, and sometimes a usable project does emerge.

"We've actually had a lot of projects that **have been successful just within the span of the hackathon,"** Narain says.

In the five years since the ATHack began, more than 300 participants have worked on upwards of 70 projects. At least **one has led to a business launch:** Massachusetts-based tech startup Puffin Innovations, founded by 2015 ATHack participants who developed a portable Bluetooth joystick mouse to provide smart device access in mobile settings.

"Co-designers have ideas and projects they're excited about, whether it's a way to do a hobby or something to help them go about day-to-day life," says Narain. "You're working closely with the co-designer. You get a better understanding of the challenges they may be faced with. The experience can be really eye-opening."

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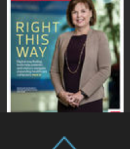About Us   Contact Us   Privacy   Terms & Conditions   Site Map

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