



## EDITOR'S NOTE

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# A tip from the tech world

**H**ave you heard of a hack day? How about a hackathon or hackfest? These are different names for the same thing: an event where computer programmers collaborate intensively on software development projects for as short as a day or as long as week.

Sometimes there's a specific goal, like finding new uses for a single company's application programming interface, as is the case with Yahoo's Open Hack Day, a public event held since 2006. Or sometimes it's for a cause, like Random Hacks of Kindness, a joint effort between Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, NASA and the World Bank, where tech professionals volunteer to create solutions for disaster management and crisis response situations.

But sometimes hack days are held solely to drive company innovation. Facebook and Google are examples of organizations that hold internal hack days to foster idea generation and software development. In fact, Facebook's trademark "Like" button was born from a hackathon, according to *Wired*, which also describes these events as a "group brainstorm and software-coding party."

What's my point for Green Industry professionals? All organizations have pain points they'd like help solving and any company may

benefit from a new "big idea," whether it's a way to increase revenue, improve customer service or cut costs through efficiency. The answers may lie within your staff, but employees need the encouragement and time to pursue innovation, outside of their day-to-day duties. Many owners and managers believe their "open-door" policies ensure new ideas will roll in as employees have them. But all employees don't know all of your challenges. And many of them, due to their roles in the company or for cultural reasons, may not feel comfortable sharing them. For example, due to a culture with a deeply rooted respect for authority, Hispanic employees may not voluntarily offer feedback for fear of "challenging" their superiors, according to Sonia Diaz with the National Hispanic Landscape Alliance. (See "How to prepare Latinos for leadership" in our October issue.)

So why not host a hack day? If you're familiar with "lean management," consider a hack day to be a shorter, less structured version of a kaizen event. It's like taking a page from Zuckerberg, not Demming. (If you don't speak "lean," companies use kaizen events to analyze and remove waste from a given process to pursue continuous improvement over time.)

Many of you will offer education over the winter or early-spring training. Why not clear the schedule and set aside time for your employees to brainstorm and problem solve? Buy some pizza or subs, give your employees a challenge or two to tackle, split them up into groups and give them a deadline. Then, each group could present its solution to a panel of judges, which could offer a reward for the best idea.

Maybe you won't implement anything from your first hackathon, but the creativity and viability of some ideas might surprise you. And you could improve morale and empower your people in the process.

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