



The Future of Travel

The 4th Travel & Hospitality
Revolution, Part II:
*Innovators, Incubators &
Hackathons*



Gregoire M. Poirier, President



INTRODUCTION

The 4th Travel Technology Revolution is here. New technologies, increased data and advanced digitization are changing the travel provider tool set. And some of the most innovative solutions are coming from unlikely places.

Rather than top-down innovation, the most dramatic advancements in travel & hospitality technology are increasingly being driven at the grassroots level. Today, larger vendors, consultant enterprises and even industry standard makers are developing forums to encourage these grassroots efforts.

In fact, hackathons, incubators and startup competitions are taking a leading role in moving the travel industry forward – delivering much of the innovation and actual advances in software development within the space. These participants are helping the industry embrace new and emerging technology quickly to solve some of travels biggest problems and connect emotionally to the customer experience.

HACKATHONS

What's a hackathon, exactly?

A hackathon is a sprint-like event that brings together a wide range of software development talent (like programmers, designers, and project managers) to solve problems in a live, collaborative environment. The goal of these types of events is to create innovative, workable solutions – hardware or software – in a very short timeframe (typically 24-48 hours). Participants demonstrate their solutions live and the event hosts present awards for the “best” hacks (winners typically get cash and other prizes of value as well as talent recognition).

Essentially, hackathons are a cross-pollination environment wherein different technologies meet and cooperate to create new and innovative products. They're a testing ground that provides added energy and strategic thinking to expand the possibilities of product development:

“Successful hackathons encourage innovative ideas that meet the challenges, presented in a prototype so you get the look and feel of the application and can really see the developers vision. It's great to get developers outside of the travel industry thinking about solutions because they are not limited by preconceived notions that are often found within our travel companies.”

*– Sandy Angel, Director of Specifications,
OpenTravel Alliance*

HACKATHONS

There are several hackathons already established within the travel and hospitality environment. Below are just three examples of popular travel and hospitality hackathons, and some of the interesting products that have arisen from these events:

IATA NDC Hackathon

The International Air Transport Association (IATA), the trade association for the world's airlines, hosts an annual NDC Hackathon wherein participants use NDC* APIs to address challenges around leisure or business travel. This hackathon adheres to the traditional format of a short planning period followed by a 24-28 hour coding experience. But what's unique about the IATA event is that it is followed by a 6-week incubation phase that ensures the winning ideas have the potential to become strong and successful business cases and includes the possibility to pitch these ideas at industry forums, thus improving the long-term success of the solutions developed.

ubTrippin - A mobile app to help to organize, manage, book and monitor trips for teams and individuals.

Pho Tra – An app that enables leisure travellers to plan their entire travel itinerary with a click on the Internet image of their dream destination.

NINA – An airline chatbot assistant that uses natural language processing (NLP) to help users book travel.

* The New Distribution Capability (NDC) is a travel industry-supported program launched by IATA for the development and market adoption of a new, XML-based data transmission standard. The NDC Standard enhances the capability of communications between airlines and travel agents and is open for others to implement and use.

HACKATHONS

OpenTravel Alliance Virtual Hackathon

Additionally, this year, the OpenTravel Alliance launched its first virtual hackathon. Participants were tasked with enhancing the connected consumer's travel experience in a unique way using at least one of the provided APIs that implement OpenTravel Messaging. The top prize was awarded to Workplace Surfer, a web application that allows users to browse and contact co-working spaces within a particular city and arrange transportation through a car sharing service.

American Airlines HackWars

Each spring, more than 700 American Airlines (AA) designers, developers and IT gurus converge on Austin, Texas, for HackWars — an intense, nonstop 24-hour hackathon where they're tasked with “forming, storming and norming” new apps to benefit both AA customers and employees. In 2017, HackWars was focused on artificial intelligence, drones and augmented and virtual reality. Reportedly the first place team designed an app that would allow users to determine the size of their luggage in advance of arriving to airport or at a kiosk before proceeding to the gate. Additionally, using the app users could “prepay for any potential expenses” associated with their luggage, thus streamlining the check-in process and improving the customer experience for AA travelers.

STARTUP COMPETITIONS

In addition to hackathons, the travel and hospitality industry is also seeing an explosion of startup competitions. Early stage travel-and-hospitality-focused companies are leveraging startup competitions to find mentors, source capital and improve their overall visibility. These events provide emerging companies the opportunity to pitch their business plan/product, get relevant feedback from subject-matter experts, win prize money and workshop support and get exposure to Angel investors.

Here are two examples of travel and hospitality startup competitions and the products they're supporting:

EyeforTravel

In October 2018, EyeforTravel, a media company serving the travel and hospitality industry held its eight-annual startup awards. This year's program included a startup competition featuring innovative products like:

ZingTrip - a mobile application that helps people stay fit while traveling

Kiva - an app that helps meeting planners and travel agents book meetings and events in real-time

UNWTO Tourism Startup Competition

In September 2018, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) held its first tourism startup competition. In what was billed as the world's largest initiative dedicated to "identifying startups that will lead the transformation of the travel and tourism sector", participants had the opportunity to network and pitch their disruptive solutions to a jury of global tourism leaders, including top investors and corporations.

INCUBATORS

Another benefit awarded to many startup competition winners is an invitation to join an incubator program that will help them further develop, refine, and launch their innovative solutions. These incubators often involve hands-on and holistic support from advisors and other support staff to provide guidance on virtually every aspect of the startup experience, not just the business plan and pitch.

For example, *Testbed.Vegas*, a travel technology incubator in Las Vegas, is building a vibrant travel & hospitality technology community by helping travel startups network, research and test next generation technologies in one of the worlds most technologically innovative travel markets:

“Testbed.Vegas is established based upon the view that a city revolving around the travel experience should be central to the creation of technology platforms that operate the industry. We uncover companies that have made a start in Las Vegas, provide exposure for these companies and link them with partners in our network that can assist in their stage of the life cycle. Next stage objectives will provide a physical space in Las Vegas, and the full spectrum of a supporting community for young companies, such as professional organizational or technical guidance; target customers; a user and knowledge base; and potential investors.”

– Mark Fancourt, Co-Founder Testbed.Vegas

INCUBATORS

Additionally, *Voyager HQ* in New York is helping its travel technology startup members build the future of travel by offering access to investors, corporate partners, proprietary insights and a robust member network. Startup members include a wide range of solutions, such as:

BringIt – A company that picks up baggage from the airport and delivers it to any location within 4 hours so travellers can walk out of the airport hands-free.

HotelsbyDay – A solution that allows travelers to book a daytime hotel room for half the price of an overnight stay, and enables hoteliers to maximize occupancy.

Finally, *Travel Startups Incubator, LLC*, a global travel technology incubator, advisory service and investment platform, helps fund, advise, connect and inspire travel technology startups. For example, they're already working with KIVA, the second place winner in this year's EyeForTravel start-up competition.

To date, the company has incubated, funded and advised over 20+ early stage travel technology companies around the world. Its nine-week, virtual Traction Program prepares startups for success through relevant learning content, strategic advisory calls and guest speakers offering their insights into how startups can succeed in the travel industry. And its Global Growth Program provides pre-funded, early-stage, Seed-Series A companies with strategic advisory and mentorship, access to investor and travel industry network, and marketing support.

INNOVATORS

While much of the innovation in travel and hospitality is coming from the grassroots (hackathons, start-up competitions and incubators), more established companies are also making big waves in the industry.

For example, an early stage company building solid revenue streams and innovating travel experiences for group business is *Groupdesk.io*. Groupdesk is an online platform that's revolutionizing group travel management – evolving it from Excel spreadsheets to a fully digital, interactive process. Groupdesk, leverages advanced technology, like its real-time interface, live inventory management capabilities and automated business functions (think: room block management and automated guest-specific reservations detail) to streamline group travel—making it easier for:

Travelers and travel managers to make bookings and manage travel, and

Group planners and suppliers to manage products and services in real-time.

“The Groupdesk platform puts more responsibility in the hands of the traveler and automates much of the group travel minutiae. As a result, our clients experience up to an 80% reduction in administrative responsibilities. With Groupdesk, group travel providers are able to scale, deliver superior service, and maintain a lean staff.”

– Michael Craig, Sales and Strategy for Groupdesk.io

INNOVATORS

And finally, one of the more exciting innovators in the space is *Winding Tree*, a blockchain-powered decentralized travel ecosystem.

After successfully raising \$16 million from an ICO with over 7000 contributors, Winding Tree's technology is designed to leapfrog the traditional travel intermediary paradigm. Through blockchain and an open-sourced infrastructure, Winding Tree decentralizes hospitality inventory and technology, so travel start-ups can more easily develop innovative products and increase their speed-to-market.

“Our vision for the travel industry is one of open access and permission-less innovation. We want to remove any unfair advantage that intermediaries have over the open market, and accelerate the pace of change within the travel and hospitality industry and support increased innovation in the space.”

-Pedro Anderson, COO, Winding Tree



CONCLUSION

Within the travel and hospitality industry we're increasingly seeing emerging technologies develop and grow in untraditional ways en masse. From grassroots hackathons to travel-focused start-up competitions, incubators and innovators, the industry is charging into the 4th Travel Technology Revolution with gusto and fearless innovation. And this charge will only continue as technological solutions and disruptions arise to enable clearer pathways forward in:

- Converging travel sub-verticals
- Addressing large infrastructural investment challenges
- Managing massive amount of consumer/customer data

While innovation in these areas was once thought of in terms of years or decades, greater innovation at the grassroots level is altering the timeline to years and even months.



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