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We Ran Our APIStrat Hackathon Using Google Spreadsheet

Or – How Our Cool Custom Solution Was Lost, And What Happened Next…



Last week we organized the first edition of Speedhack™ during the API Strategy Conference in Chicago. Speedhack is a hackathon of a new genre. Instead of hacking on a big project during 24 hours, hackers have to solve some challenges to earn points and win the trophy.

Teams have to solve the same challenges, in only 3 hours. For this first edition we had 8 challenges proposed by our lovely sponsors Twilio, Twitter, Context.io, Respoke, Traitify, APItools, Esri and Sendgrid. To add some stress and competition in this Speedhack we wanted to do everything realtime. Teams need direct feedback on their hack from evangelists and to see the progress of other teams.

If you are organizing a larger hackathon there are great tools available like ChallengePost, but for us this was a little trickier…

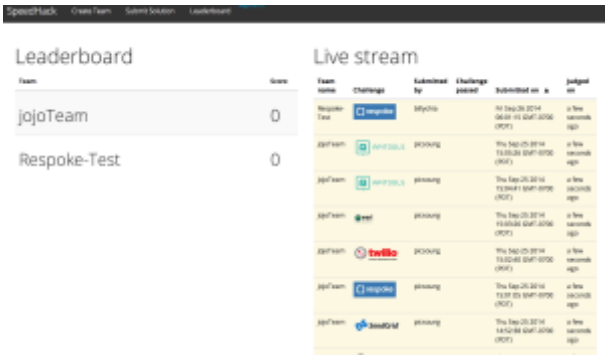
The flow: team would finish a challenge, submit their solution, judge will stop by, valid their solution and award them points. Team will then move on to a next challenge. Points and ranking will be displayed on a leaderboard.

Pretty straightforward. Unfortunately we could not find an existing service that we could use for this specific use case. Hackathon management tools added to much complexity for what we were trying to achieve.

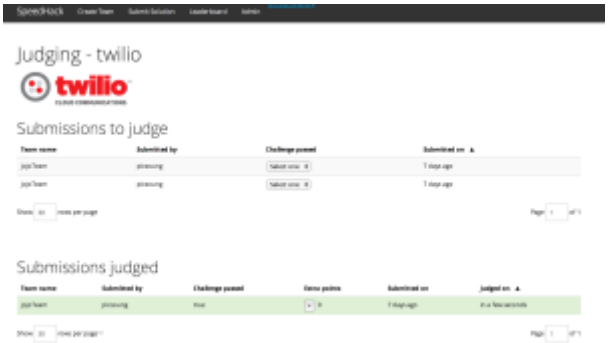
But how we could make this happen? We are hackers. We will build it ourselves !

Hackers Build Stuff

I consider myself a hacker so I got very excited to build everything from scratch. In couple of days we had a working prototype using Meteor. Teams could register using their Github credentials and submit their solution. Judges would have a dashboard where they can visualize solutions and give points (pass or fail). All of this will generate the leaderboard that would be displayed in the venue.



SpeedHack Leaderboard



Speedhack Judging interface

I even added an API, so we could hook a hubot IRC bot. Really geeky, you could talk to the bot in the chat room to achieve all this, without having any UI.

Everything Was Going Great Until….

It worked well, it just took me a couple of hours to understand how to build my first hubot script and plug it into my thing.

The day before the event, we were ready and pretty proud of what we had built. I deployed late at night, closed my laptop and went to bed.

The next day, my hard-drive failed. Could not access *any* data. It was a useless box of electronics. Deploy did not go through and I did not see it at that time.

I was the only one working on this small project, so I didn't think to put it on Github. I had no where to get the code and deploy it again. The whole project was gone, forever. But we still had an event to organize. The clock was ticking, we had only 2 hours before the beginning of Speedhackto find a solution.

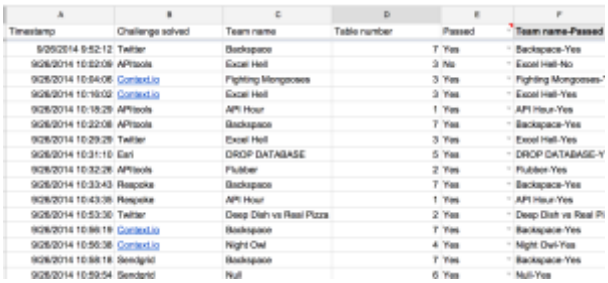
Google Spreadsheet – Our Savior

Knees on the ground, but head looking up to the sky, the cloud! Somewhere where there is nothing like "HDD failure".

We used something as simple as Google Form for teams to submit their solution. They enter their team name, the table number where they were sitting, and which challenges they have solved.

From there we would collect submissions on a global spreadsheet and grant access to judges. Each judge would select "Yes" or "No" in the "Passed" column. We trusted our judges to judge only the solutions using their technology, assuming they wouldn't mess around with the other

columns. It worked :)



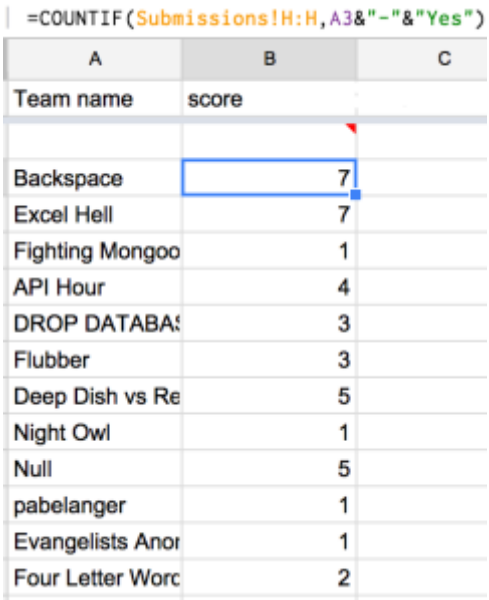
Timestamp	Challenge solved	Team name	Table number	Passed	Team name-Passed
9/26/2014 9:52:12	Twitter	Backspace	7	Yes	Backspace-Yes
9/26/2014 10:02:09	APItools	Excel Hell	3	No	Excel Hell-No
9/26/2014 10:04:08	Context.io	Fighting Mongooses	3	Yes	Fighting Mongooses-Y
9/26/2014 10:19:02	Context.io	Excel Hell	3	Yes	Excel Hell-Yes
9/26/2014 10:18:29	APItools	API Hour	1	Yes	API Hour-Yes
9/26/2014 10:22:08	APItools	Backspace	7	Yes	Backspace-Yes
9/26/2014 10:29:26	Twitter	Excel Hell	3	Yes	Excel Hell-Yes
9/26/2014 10:31:10	Earl	DROP DATABASE	5	Yes	DROP DATABASE-Y
9/26/2014 10:32:26	APItools	Flubber	2	Yes	Flubber-Yes
9/26/2014 10:33:43	Respoke	Backspace	7	Yes	Backspace-Yes
9/26/2014 10:43:38	Respoke	API Hour	1	Yes	API Hour-Yes
9/26/2014 10:53:30	Twitter	Deep Dish vs Real Pizza	2	Yes	Deep Dish vs Real Pi
9/26/2014 10:56:19	Context.io	Backspace	7	Yes	Backspace-Yes
9/26/2014 10:56:38	Context.io	Night Owl	4	Yes	Night Owl-Yes
9/26/2014 10:58:18	Sendgrid	Backspace	7	Yes	Backspace-Yes
9/26/2014 10:59:54	Sendgrid	Null	6	Yes	Null-Yes

SpeedHack Judging interface using Google Spreadsheet

Counting Points

My google spreadsheet skills are pretty limited. Just be warned, it might be as ugly as a PHP snippet found in 2004 in a dead forum. But it just works ;)

We “hacked” our way, with a new column “Teamname-Passed” where aggregated the team name and the value of “passed” column. Points will just be the number of times “Teamname-Yes” appear in the column.



```
=COUNTIF(Submissions!H:H,A3&"-"&"Yes")
```

A	B	C
Team name	score	
Backspace	7	
Excel Hell	7	
Fighting Mongoo	1	
API Hour	4	
DROP DATABA	3	
Flubber	3	
Deep Dish vs Re	5	
Night Owl	1	
Null	5	
pabelanger	1	
Evangelists Anor	1	
Four Letter Worc	2	

SpeedHack formula to count points

This was stored in an intermediary sheet.
In an another sheet we sorted this table.

Here is our leaderboard.
As we have used references to other sheets, this updates in real time.

```
=SORT('intermediary table'!A:B,2,FALSE)
```

Team name	score
Backspace	7
Excel Hell	7
Deep Dish vs Real Pizza	5
Null	5
API Hour	4
DROP DATABASE	3
Flubber	3
Four Letter Word	2
Fighting Mongooses	1
Night Owl	1
pabelanger	1
Evangelists Anonymous	1

Sorted Leaderboard

This template is pretty easy to re-use and could be found here. This experience is a good example of “keeping it simple” philosophy. We’ve found tools that were too complicated, we built something simpler and in the end we used even a more simple tool. And it worked just fine.

If I find the passion and the time, I’ll re-code what I originally built to benefit the community. This time, I will commit it to Github. I promise.

Overall, Speedhack was a great time for hackers and sponsors, keep your eyes open for another edition somewhere else in the world ;)