Moldova Re-invents the Hackathon

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This last weekend saw the first hackathon ever to occur in the country of Moldova, and they definitely made it their own. For a country that is just starting to build its civic hacker community, the results were nothing short of remarkable: 85 participants set to work almost immediately within impressive, self-organized team structures to produce 18 functional apps.

In traditional terms, this hackathon could be described as more of a code sprint for the final three days of a prize challenge, but even that description understates the innovation and complexity of the event format. In addition, it doesn't do justice to all of the accomplishments that were achieved by the organizers as well as the participants.

Background

Moldova is a small country in Eastern Europe, between Romania and Ukraine. It is one of the poorest countries in Europe, and is striving to begin the process of joining the EU. It is also the recipient of a $20 million line of credit from the World Bank to fund its e-government efforts, as led by the e-Government Center (an official part of the Moldovan government). Moldova has an active developer community, but they are only beginning to connect with civil society and government. The country also just joined the Open Government Partnership, and has approved a National Action Plan that commits the government to self-improvement in multiple areas, one of which is the release of government data on the Moldovan Data Portal.

This hackathon, called the Open Innovation Challenge "Apps for Moldova," was the culmination of Innovation Week, which was designed to engage the private sector and civil society in the launch of this National Action Plan. Putting on this event was truly a multi-lateral effort, including the e-Government Center and the World Bank along with local non-profits, developer organizations, and private sector companies.

The Format

The desires to (a) develop a civic hacker community and (b) create public usage of government data in order to ensure the sustainability of Moldova's open government efforts led to the unique format of this three day hackathon.

Prizes

Prizes were awarded to teams in part based on the perceived sustainability of the app and the implementation plan. The prizes were provided by the e-Government Center, MoldCell, Endava, and Fusionworks (local companies) and while some were traditional give-aways (iPads, 3G modems, relevant books…), most were truly innovative and designed to encourage the long-term sustainability of the projects and the developers. These included:

- $5000 service delivery contracts with the government of Moldova for completion of the app.
- Employment and internship opportunities with some of the biggest companies in the country.

● Workspace including all of the required office amenities.

To encourage teams to form early and come prepared, there was a submission deadline to compete for these prizes that was 8 days prior to the beginning of the event.

TechCamp

Day one of the actual event began with a half day [TechCamp](#) that brought international experts from Africa, Europe, and North and South America to educate the participants on the value and skills necessary to create great apps that leverage government data (for a complete list of who attended, see here).

The morning began with a series of very short speeches from the organizers and prize presenters and quickly moved into presentations that would tangibly benefit all participants. This included overviews of what is happening in other parts of the world, the potential benefit to Moldova of the work they are about to embark upon, and practical advise on how to win the hackathon.

At this point, all participants were split into 10 groups, each of which speed-geeked their way through 10 different presenters who provided them with additional informational overviews on topics that may benefit them during the weekend. This included data vizualization, mapping, crowd sourcing, data scraping, and how to access government data. In addition, this introduced all of the participants to many of the international experts that were available to assist them over the weekend.

The TechCamp closed with an opportunity for the participants to return to the presenter that they most wanted to learn from and spend a half hour diving deeper into the topic. Everyone went to a networking lunch at which the experts mingled amongst the participants to further discuss relevant concepts and begin to form working relationships.

Code Sprint

While teams had to submit proposals early in order to be eligible for the prizes, developers were invited to attend and join in the activities even if they didn't yet have a team. In addition, people were encouraged to come up with new ideas during the course of the TechCamp, and information was provided to them about unrelated prize competitions that they may be able to enter.

In order to let everyone know the diversity of work that was occurring and to connect teams with needs to available developers, the code sprint began with a series of 1 minute presentations by each team of all 26 submitted applications. Following on this, new ideas were presented. While some teams did not ask for additional help, most did and these were given a number and distributed around the room so that all of the free developers could talk to them and determine which team they would like to work with.

Once the teams were established, everyone was given free run of the space and spread out to get to work. The experts began circulating between individual teams to provide advice and assistance and determine what needs they may have. The organizers of the event turned their attention to fulfilling these needs. In two projects, required government data that was not yet available was released in the open data portal based upon requests from the developers during the course of the weekend.

As I said before, this was truly a multi-lateral effort which gave the developers the sense that they

sit at a critical point for the future of Moldova and that their effective engagement can make a significant difference in the future of their country.

Judging and Awards

2pm on Sunday was the deadline for all work to be completed. Teams had to upload two screenshots and a paragraph explanation to http://appsformoldova.tumblr.com/ and also give a five minute presentation to all participants. During these presentations, each team was awarded with Certificates of Participation and flash drives. The judges also began their scoring.
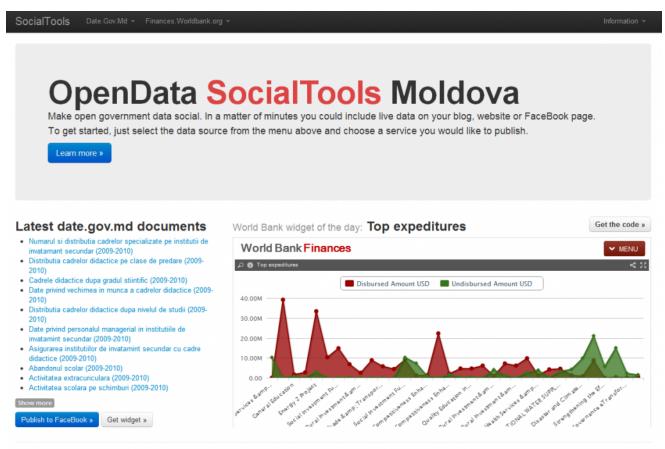
Following the presentations, each team set up a laptop for the apps showcase, thus enabling all participants (and judges) to see firsthand how the apps work ask additional questions.

The event finished with a formal awards ceremony and a celebratory networking reception.
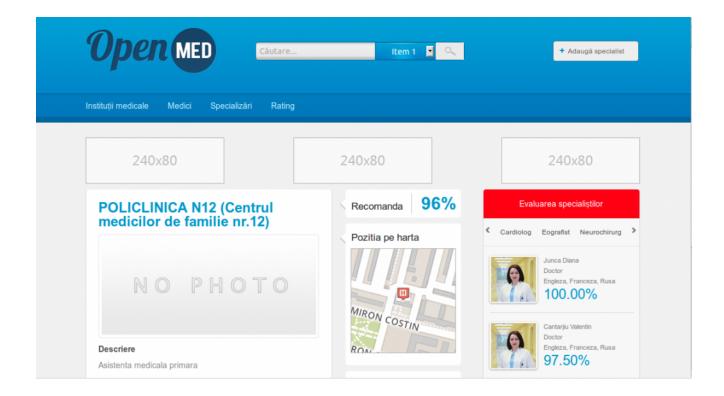
The Results

As with any hackathon, the most exciting outcomes from this event are the apps that were created during it. A full list of the developed apps is available at http://appsformoldova.tumblr.com/ but the winners of the government-sponsored prizes were Social Tools, OpenMed, MoldBizPedia, and E-Ticket. Here is a quick overview and screenshot of each app.

Social Tools is an API for the Government Data Portal. It provides easy to use widgets that present data from the portal.
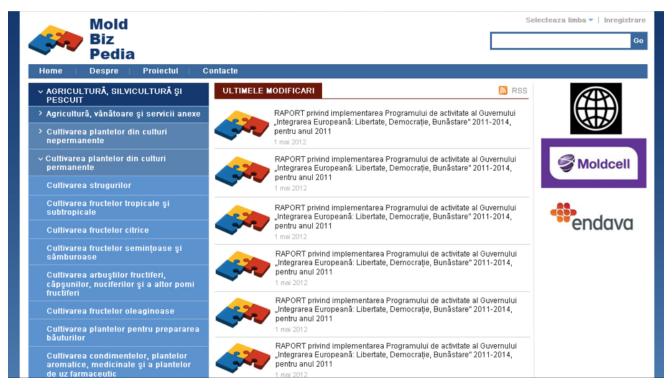

OpenMed is a website that offers information, ratings, locations, and financial information about hospitals and doctors. It is intended to make it easier for people to find appropriate medical care.

MoldBizPedia is a data portal for everything about doing business in Moldova. It intends to combine government information with private sector information to be a one-stop-shop for anyone running, or considering starting a business in Moldova and will provide information on the necessities such as regulations, laws, and financing as well as providing the opportunity to find business partners and get advice from others.

E-Ticket is an online ticketing system for the broad diversity of cultural and theatrical events that occur within Moldova. This is built on information from the Ministry of Culture and by making this information publicly available and easily accessible will serve to enhance tourism in Moldova.

Beyond the apps however, there are several additional levels at which the results of this event may be judged — and from my perspective, it would appear that it was a success on all of them.

Globally speaking, significant advice was drawn on from all over the world to educate and inform this young civic hacker community. The participants seemed to gain a great deal from these interactions — as did the experts. In addition, while the follow-up analysis is just beginning, one goal for this event was to provide a case study for other countries to learn from. So much worked correctly in Moldova, but there are also lessons that can be drawn from this experience to improve on it for next time. Look for more posts on this topic over the next month as this analysis continues.

For Moldova, significant progress was made in terms of both encouraging use of government data from the Moldovan Data Portal and laying the groundwork for a civic hacker community. Admittedly, there is still much to be done to fully achieve both of these goals, but a solid foundation has been laid. Furthermore, several of the teams are on track to become self-sustaining as small businesses, thus supporting economic development in the country.

An unexpected benefit from this event was an upsurge in the release of data to the portal by Ministries of the government. While I don't have enough evidence to prove that this was the cause of the sudden release of numerous additional datasets, release of datasets had stagnated until the event drew near.

Finally, given all of the above success and the fact that everyone involved – the experts, the organizers, and the participants all had a great time, it is very likely that this is only the first of many "hackathons" in Moldova. This fact will most likely go the farthest towards creating sustainable use of government data and a vibrant civic hacker community.

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