

By GRACE CHUA

'Hackathons' spark ideas for inventive solutions

Strangers with range of skills come together to solve problems at the events

FOUR strangers meet in April; five months later, they are testing a mobile app that allows caregivers of people with disabilities to track their charges.

A robotics start-up founder learns of problems that ports have in monitoring ship emissions - and develops an airborne drone that can do the job more easily.

These are some of the fruits of "hackathons" here - events which bring people with a range of skills together, typically for a weekend of brainstorming, and spur collaboration, often between strangers, to solve problems.

The latest, the Data in the City data visualisation challenge by the Infocomm Development Authority and Urban Prototyping (UP) Singapore, a subsidiary of tech consultancy Newton Circus, was launched on Thursday.

Public hackathons have grown

in number here. UP Singapore, for instance, held just two events in 2012 but has six so far this year.

Singapore universities, too, have organised public and students-only collaborative challenges. In 2011, for instance, Nanyang Technological University's commercial arm NTU Ventures organised an inter-varsity hackathon.

Newton Circus chief executive

Daryl Arnold said its hackathons show the public and private sectors the value of opening up their data. They also make it easier to involve a range of people in solving problems. There are typically one or two tangible success stories from each event it puts on but the firm has invested close to \$2 million largely "out of our own pocket", Mr Arnold said.

In future, the UP Singapore hackathon series has to be sustainable as a business to continue. Where data is made public, the agency or firm that owns it has to see returns to cover the cost of data collection, he added.

Participating government agencies have also seen benefits.

The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) released its

data, and that of stakeholders such as PSA Corporation and Jurong Port, for a Smart Port Hackathon last month.

MPA chief executive Andrew Tan said stakeholders such as Jurong Port are engaging some groups for follow-up discussions as some of them developed "interesting algorithms and data visualisation models that might be use-

ful to their operations". And MPA's own applications will draw on the ideas presented, he added.

Economic Development Board chief information officer Gian Yi-Hsen said platforms such as hackathons bring together the government sector, industry and citizens to work on interesting ideas.

Robotics start-up founder Gabriel Kang, 37, said the Smart Port hackathon was good exposure to a new industry. He said: "You can't be developing solutions to problems that you don't know exist."

Civil servant Chew Hui Qin, 30, was on a team whose mobile app "D. Stress", for the caregivers of those with disabilities, won a \$20,000 grant in April.

"For a lot of participants, we wouldn't have been working on something like this if the hackathon hadn't brought us all together," she said.

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