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Virtual Hackathon Aims To Move Solar Forward

03/03/2015

By Theresa Chong

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The SunShot Catalyst Prize program is a [60-day virtual hackathon](#) that was launched in mid-February and sponsored by the U.S. Dept. of Energy's SunShot Initiative. The program awards innovators that make a product that can reduce the soft costs associated with the solar industry, such as financing and permitting.

"The work that's being done in this hackathon is really work that's being utilized to advance the solar industry as a whole," says Debbie Brodt-Giles, digital assets manager at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL). She connects SunShot Catalyst participants to NREL data and tools to ensure each design is fully optimized.

The competition consists of four stages: idea creation, business innovation, prototyping and incubation. Out of 40 submissions, 17 moved on to the third stage, hackathon prototyping. Each team got up to \$25,000 to spend on [Topcoder](#), a proprietary crowd-sourcing development platform by Appirio, a San Francisco-based cloud consultant. Topcoder gives teams access to more than 750,000 experts in development, design and data science. The \$25,000 allows each team to pay for experts on Topcoder and fund small hacking challenges that must be completed within 60 days.

"People don't understand the value of efficiency upgrades," says John Jabara, founder of [Savenia Labs](#), Bethesda, Md., and a SunShot Catalyst participant. "You have to communicate that value."

Jabara is designing a system, called [Savenia Solar Ratings-CarFax for Solar](#), which helps solar professionals and homeowners quantify and promote how much their solar-energy system is worth to potential buyers. After users input their solar-energy-system data online, they can download marketing materials that clearly demonstrate their solar-energy system's value.

Another team, [Solar Site Design](#), is trying to reduce customer acquisition expenses by up to 50% by aggregating and connecting project data from solar sales professionals to engineers, manufactures and financiers.

Elaine Ulrich, soft-costs program manager for the SunShot Initiative, says more than half the costs associated with solar deployment are related to non-hardware. "These are the kinds of things that can be addressed through software," Ulrich says.

Teams will present their solar products to the public May 14-21 in San Francisco. Up to five finalists will receive a \$30,000 cash prize. After the six-month incubation period, ending on Nov. 9, 2015, finalists will be reevaluated, and each team could win up to an additional \$70,000 cash prize if they achieve their pre-established targets and goals.

Keywords: [Sunshot Catalyst](#); [U.S. Dept. of Energy](#); [Hackathon](#); [Solar](#)

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