

Edward C. Baig: Have a great idea for 5G? Verizon may give you a million dollars to make it happen

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Think you've come up with a killer idea for exploiting the emerging next-generation wireless networks known as 5G?

If Verizon buys into in your vision and considers it commercially viable, the company will issue you up to a cool \$1 million in seed money.

What's more, you'll be invited to develop the concept on live networks in one of Verizon's 5G incubator labs, in New York City; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Los Angeles; Palo Alto, California, and Washington, D.C. And Verizon will provide training and technical support to the chosen innovators.

It's all part of a "Built on 5G Challenge" launched this week at CES in Las Vegas during a keynote address by Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg.

5G is all about blistering speeds and low latency or network responsiveness, but the promise behind the technology extends well beyond the wicked fast handset you hope to carry in your pocket. There's surely no small amount of hype around 5G, with Verizon referring to it as the "fourth industrial revolution." The tech is meant to play an important role in self-driving cars, remote medicine, immersive education and all things connected, whether in your home, business or entire "smart community."

How might you play a small part in the revolution? Verizon's [challenge](#) is

open to venture-funded companies, bootstrapped startups, non-profits, educators, and yes, creative individuals. The \$1 million that the company promises to dish out represents a pool of money that will be shared among a limited selection of potential winners; no more than two or three seems likely. If you're the only one you could get the full million.

Not just a PowerPoint

Applicants must meet certain criteria, says Sanyogita Shamunder, a network vice president for 5G ecosystems and innovation at Verizon. Is what you've cooked up real? What capabilities does the idea use? Can it realistically be implemented, given the current state of artificial intelligence, available hardware or other technologies? And does it really require 5G?

"It can't be just a PowerPoint. There needs to be a proof of concept," Shamunder says.

It's too soon to tell, she adds, whether chosen ideas will turn into actual commercial products. Verizon could acquire the winning company behind an innovative idea—or not. It could license some aspect of the technology—or not.

According to Shamunder, "There should be potential for it to be monetizable, but every idea doesn't have to be like that. It can be something that can be used to solve some unique societal problem as well."

Verizon claims it is motivated by the concept of generating such ideas and not because of any of the extra marketing attention the challenge brings to its 5G as it launches these networks at the same time that rivals such as AT&T, T-Mobile and Sprint do.

Shamunder concedes that the marketing aspect is a "byproduct," but hardly the main purpose.

"We don't have a monopoly on ideas," she says. "There are people out there who have deep insight into certain industries and that have their own unique problems. We have these toolboxes we want them to use to solve these problems and they are better at doing that than I am."

The various legal and other requirements that are part of the challenge are still being hammered out and will be posted on a Verizon website; it is probably safe to assume that Verizon will retain first right of refusal over any idea that is selected.

It is unclear what kind of ownership stake Verizon will take in any of the winning ideas.

This isn't, in fact, the first time Verizon has challenged outsiders to develop ideas for 5G. In partnership with Ericsson and the Mass Tech Leadership Council, Verizon in November announced the launch of the Verizon 5G Robotics Challenge for universities, startups, and other developers in the greater Boston area to create 5G-powered robotics technologies that will transform modern industry. The pool money in that challenge was \$300,000. Winners have not yet been selected. It has issued another similar challenge geared toward first responders.

Verizon describes its far broader latest challenge as "a nationwide search for the biggest and brightest ideas that will bring the true power of 5G to life. Winners will be judged on innovation, commercial viability, and the potential impact and sustainability of how their ideas will be able to make the world a better, more connected place."

Judging will begin in the spring.

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