Orange France
Making the Impossible Possible

How Orange France Transformed Software Development and Defied the Naysayers
Xavier Perret's colleagues couldn't believe his proposal.

It was March 2016 and the chief digital officer for Orange France’s business-to-business division wanted to develop a new self-service mobile application for the company’s corporate customers. The goal was to reduce the number of calls to Orange's call centers by enabling customers to troubleshoot technical issues, find billing information and perform other common administrative tasks on their own.

But that wasn’t the part that had Perret’s colleagues scratching their heads.

No, the hard-to-believe bit was that Perret planned to collect feedback from real customers, develop a set of minimum requirements based on that feedback, iteratively build the application, and deliver working software to production—all in as little as six months. That was about a third of the time it normally took Orange to release a new software to customers. Many at Orange were skeptical it could be done.

“When I told them about our plans, many of my colleagues looked at me as if I had two heads!” Perret said. “They told me it was impossible, but we proved it wasn’t.”

Making the impossible possible required Perret and his team to make significant changes to how they developed software and to adopt new tools and technologies to support the approach. To help, the company enlisted the services of Pivotal Labs, the Agile software development arm of Pivotal. Orange developers sat side-by-side with Pivotal developers, a technique known as pair programming, learning the ins-and-outs of Agile methodology while simultaneously building the new mobile application.

The team also built and deployed the application on Pivotal Cloud Foundry, a cloud-native platform that automates many of the administrative tasks that often hinder developer productivity. This meant Orange developers didn’t have to worry about network configurations or provisioning virtual machines but instead could spend most if not all of their time and attention on the application itself.
Perret’s team of developers started working on the application, employing the Agile techniques it was learning with Pivotal Labs along the way, in April of 2016. The team spent the next six months continuously repeating the process of gathering feedback, iterating on features, then testing them with users. When the team felt they had a working minimum viable product, they delivered it live to customers. It was October 2016. It didn’t take long for users to start resolving their own support issues using the app and incoming support calls to start dropping. By all accounts, the engagement was a success.

Perret credits the team’s collaboration with Pivotal Labs as well as the willingness on the part of his developers to adopt a new approach to building software for the application’s initial success. “Our developers are totally focused on our customers and the user experience, and that is the key to building great applications and software products,” Perret said. “The methods and practices we learned with Pivotal Labs are invaluable.”

That’s not to say the new mobile application is “finished.” There’s no such concept in the Agile world. Orange developers continue to evolve and improve the application based on how customers actually use it. It’s a living product, not a one-time project.

All this left Perret’s colleagues impressed. In fact, they were so impressed that Orange is now starting the process of spreading the new approach of software development to other groups within the company. The excitement is contagious. And now, everyone at Orange knows that anything is possible. 