

New iPhone application developed **using Offshore Agile**

Simon & Schuster's audio division markets the Pimsleur language CD-based learning products, one of the best-known brands in its category. The full product is released on CDs. A companion CD-based suite called Pimsleur Express had been created to provide an introductory travel-targeted product at an entry-level price point, but was no longer marketed. Pimsleur Express offered one introductory language lesson plus a series of foreign-language conversations relevant to tourists and travelers. With the popularity of the iPhone, S&S saw an opportunity to leverage the Pimsleur Express content into a new iPhone application, with new features specific to the iPhone mobile platform that would make it even more useful to travelers on-the-go.

They intended to reuse as much content and lesson design as possible from the Express product, and tightly limit the development budget. That would allow the audio division to make a business case for the new application as a low-cost reuse of existing intellectual property in a new format – and a way to gain further profits from a sunk cost. In addition to the need to limit the development cost, the audio division needed to release the new iPhone application as soon as possible in order to beat other brand-name language products to the iPhone market.

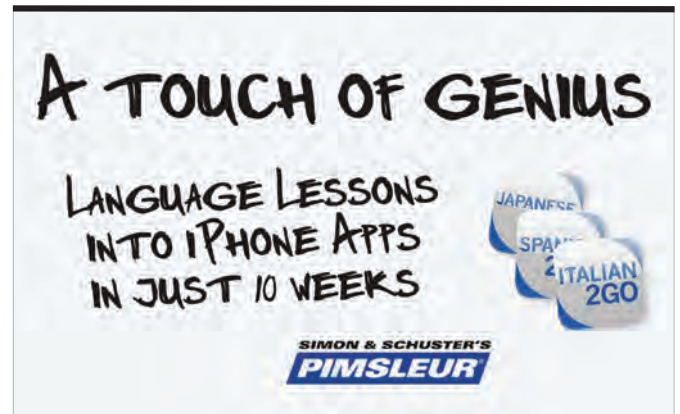
A history of success

ThoughtWorks was engaged for the effort based on a relationship that already counted several successful joint projects. Earlier ThoughtWorks had produced a prototype for S&S to demonstrate the feasibility of reuse of the content in a new format. Now ThoughtWorks offered its Offshore Agile development capability to minimise cost and meet the tight deadline.

The project staffing and schedule were set to achieve a release for the peak travel season; with a senior ThoughtWorks consultant situated onsite in New York with Pimsleur product owners, working with a team of six developers in Beijing. The onsite consultant worked with the product owners by day, and coordinated with the Beijing developer team overnight, with the aid of project management tools Basecamp and ThoughtWorks' Studios' Mingle.

Bad news early

Because of the ten-week timeframe, release iterations were conducted weekly with showcases run by the development team and demonstrated in Webex video conferences using both the iPhone simulator and an iPod Touch. Weekly iterations were important to success: midway through the project, the business users recognised an issue with a key user interface



element. It just wasn't as easy to use as everyone had thought, and it was a critical part of the user experience. If this had been discovered after the product was delivered by the developers, as is often the case in typical projects and especially when using offshore development, it would have been too late. The product would have either had to be released and fixed later, or Simon & Schuster would risk a competitor beating them to market.

Instead, ThoughtWorks' Offshore Agile with its reliance on frequent business team showcases of real functionality meant that the issue was found by the users with enough lead time for the original schedule to be maintained. ThoughtWorks and S&S redesigned the component through several rapid iterations until they were satisfied with the user experience. The team was thrown another curve, this time by Apple in the form of several betas and a final release for a new iPhone OS – the 3.0 OS. Not in the scope of the original bid, ThoughtWorks was still able to accommodate the releases and move the product to the new iPhone platform through the course of the schedule. This was made possible by the Agile approach, which included a comprehensive automated test suite that provides a safety net that facilitates rapid response to changing requirements.

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Great features, first to market

The iPhone application consists of a half-hour main language lesson, followed by a series of conversations covering situations that a traveler would typically encounter. Above and beyond the original Pimsleur Express CD-based product functionality, the iPhone application offers some useful new features. One is the ability to enhance the pre-recorded conversations with “word balloons” containing the words and phrases being spoken that scroll automatically in synch with the spoken conversation. In addition, the user can scroll the conversation back and forth seamlessly, practicing each part of the conversation phrase-by-phrase by clicking the “Hear it” button on a flashcard. The user can practice his or her pronunciation until satisfied.

S&S’ audio division was able to launch the product, beating other brand name competitors to market. The software is designed to make it a simple task to produce new versions of the application in additional languages without new coding – making use of a streamlined release process using existing content. With this rollout of a new product using existing content, S&S Pimsleur reduced their new product investment cost, and delivered technology that offers new competitive benefits to the consumer.

“It was every publishers dream come true. By using the content from our Express series, first published in 2003 (and now all but dormant) to make these six cutting edge iPhone Apps, there was no almost no additional editorial investment. This allowed us to get our feet wet in the new mobile market with much less risk. Between what we’ll learn, and what we’ll earn from the Pimsleur 2Go Apps, we come out ahead.”

Robert Paris Riger - Director, Pimsleur Language Programs