



# University of Minnesota Takes an Innovative Approach to Capital Project Management

**Skire Unifier™ brings an enterprise approach to boosting project management efficiency for more than \$250 million in annual projects.**

### Executive Summary

#### Organization

Name	University of Minnesota
Industry	Education
Location	Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota
Students	64,000

#### Business Challenges

- Improve ability to closely track costs
- Reduce the number and size of claims
- Implement consistent processes and methodologies

#### Solution

Skire Unifier™ document management, project cost and funding management, and process automation with uDesigner configuration tool.

#### Business Results

- Standardized business processes and improved performance management
- Significantly reduced change orders and virtually eliminated claims so far
- Improved information accessibility and security

#### Quote

“Establishing standard business processes has made things easier for everyone. We can easily audit project manager performance and it is much easier for contractors and architects to work with the university.”  
—Kevin McCourt, Business Manager of Capital Planning and Project Management

The University of Minnesota is one of the most comprehensive public universities in the United States, offering more than 370 fields of study at campuses in the Twin Cities, Duluth, Morris, Crookston, and Rochester. The University also has six agricultural experiment stations, two biological stations, one forestry station, and regional extension services throughout the state. Responsible for approximately \$250 million in capital projects annually is the Capital Planning and Project Management department. The department typically oversees 10-15 capital projects worth more than \$2 million at any given time, together with 250 to 300 smaller projects logged per year.

#### Seeking a Purpose-Built Platform

In the past, the Capital Planning department was part of the University's Facilities Management organization, and relied on a facilities management software program to manage construction projects. However, because the system was not adaptable to meet the unique needs of capital planning and project management, individual project managers had developed processes and workarounds to meet their own needs. With multiple filing systems, methodologies, and reporting tools, project management processes were inconsistent. Costs were difficult to track and therefore, documenting change orders and proving claims had become nearly impossible. When the Capital Planning group was spun off as an independent department, it was time to research a purpose-built project management system.



“We were seeking to implement consistent processes and methodology for all capital projects,” said Kevin McCourt, business manager for the University’s Capital Planning and Projects group. “In addition, we wanted to improve cost control, reporting, and management controls. Given the complexity and scale of our portfolio of capital projects, we knew that we could benefit from an enterprise-level approach to project management and that is why we undertook a thorough search for a new platform.” McCourt’s team conducted a comprehensive RFI and RFP process, narrowing the field to three vendors. Following an in-depth interview and demonstration process, the University of Minnesota chose Skire Unifier™.

Two university employees and two consultants implemented Skire Unifier in phases, using Skire uDesigner™ to customize the group’s business processes for use with Unifier. The team first converted non-financial processes, and then developed the financial and accounting processes, including an automated interface to the University’s general ledger program.

“We were able to easily move our existing processes into Unifier, and implementing them has been a straightforward process,” said McCourt. Today, 15 large capital projects are managed through Unifier, and the two consultants are no longer needed. New capital projects will be added as they are approved. In addition to University project managers, project architects and contractors use the Unifier system. A continuous training program, provided by the Capital Planning group, ensures that new contractor teams are quickly proficient with the software.

### **Establishing Benchmarks and Reducing Change Orders**

With Unifier, the Capital Planning department has been able to track and benchmark costs. For example, instead of having to sift through piles of paper for contractor payment applications, project managers can quickly retrieve detailed project cost data for reporting. With the ability to identify specific items and track costs over time, the University is able to much more accurately determine the costs associated with building certain types of structures. With detailed cost and scope information, audit trails, and transparency, the Capital Planning group is also seeing far fewer change orders, which represents an opportunity for huge cost savings per year.

### **Disciplined Processes and Better Performance Management**

“Establishing standard business processes has made things easier for everyone,” said McCourt. “We can audit project manager performance to improve effectiveness and it is much easier for contractors and architects to work with the University.” In the past, architects and contractors may work on several University projects with multiple University project managers—each of whom had a different way of doing things. With standardized processes, everyone knows what to expect. In addition, external partners don’t have to maintain multiple reporting systems for communicating with different university project managers.

Because the Unifier solution is Internet-based, external partners and temporary project managers can access the information they need, from wherever they are working. With Skire hosting the solution, the University gained high scalability and reliability while eliminating the need for its own IT organization to cope with the security risks entailed with providing access to external partners or with additional system maintenance.

### **Improving Collaboration and Minimizing Claims**

The Unifier platform has also facilitated collaboration between the University and its external partners. In the past, when disputes arose over project costs, an inability to find complete, correctly formatted documentation often resulted in the University settling claims—even when the University’s position was justified. Now with the ability to monitor the flow of information and easily access all related data and documents, claims are greatly reduced.



"Unifier has gone a long way toward helping us collaborate more effectively and manage our architect and contractor relationships," said McCourt. "We haven't had any claims in the past year."

### **Saving Time and Effort**

The Capital Planning group was able to standardize its filing systems based on Unifier's Document Manager. With the proper permissions, users are now able to quickly and easily find the information they need, saving tremendous amounts of time and effort. Now every project manager and user knows where documents are stored and how to find them easily. It is also much easier to retrieve information for internal audit preparation.

### **Next Steps**

McCourt hopes to begin implementing business processes for projects under \$2 million, as well as possibly extending Unifier capabilities to departments in charge of capital projects that the Capital Planning group does not directly administer, such as energy management, parking, and transportation projects. As the University of Minnesota is increasingly seeking enterprise-wide approaches to standardizing business processes, McCourt feels that Unifier could be extremely helpful wherever it is deployed.

"We have received extremely responsive support from Skire, and it has been helpful to have that collaborative environment," said McCourt. "We're pleasantly surprised at how easy it has been so far."