PATENTS: INFORMATION FOR TECHNOLOGY WATCH AND INNOVATION

M. J. José, E. Aguilar, M. Monzó, Y. Reig

Instituto de Tecnología Cerámica (ITC)
Asociación de Investigación de las Industrias Cerámicas
Universitat Jaume I. Castellón. Spain

1. INTRODUCTION

Several year have already passed since the concept of innovation ceased to be associated exclusively with R&D activities and the incorporation of technological know-how. Today, the innovative company is the company that changes, evolves, learns from the practical improvements of the competition, offers new products/services, and adopts or fine-tunes new manufacturing processes.

The present economic environment demands continuous business innovation, and this requires abundant information. The concept of vigilance was thus born which, in its widest sense, means monitoring any factor that might affect company competitiveness.

Of the different types of vigilance, technology watch deals with the available or newly appearing technologies, capable of being implemented in new processes or products. Such vigilance works essentially through scientific, technical, technological and regulatory information, disseminated broadly in books, scientific and technical papers, congress proceedings, patents, technical standards, doctoral dissertations, specialised publications, etc.

Numerous studies cite patents as one of the sources of greatest value for practising technology watch, since, in addition to its intrinsic characteristics of novelty, inventive activity and industrial application, indispensable for award, a patent is characterised by containing perfectly structured information and by publication in specialised databases, which may be publicly accessible or commercial, many of which are available on the Internet.

This availability, together with the accessibility that Internet provides, encourages SMEs to initiate their own technology watch through patents, conducting a basic vigilance that provides useful information for the companies.

It should be noted that when a company is interested in patenting a device or product, this vigilance can never replace the patentability reports or advanced information services on patents provided by professionals.

2. TOOLS

In order to initiate any database search, it is essential to acquire some minimum knowledge on the characteristics of the documents that are going to be used, in the present case, patents and utility model documents: types, structure, significant fields, etc.

Secondly, the databases to be searched need to be selected. There are currently over 70 specialised patent databases, which may be classified in three groups: a) national, produced by the industrial property offices of each country, b) supranational, produced by international organisms, which gather documents from several countries or documents deriving from treaties and agreements concerning industrial property, and c) commercial databases. Several authors have analysed the main patent databases, of a public as well as commercial nature, available on the Internet.

In principle, for a basic search it will be sufficient to consult three or four of the publicly accessible Internet databases. It is advisable to have full information on all of these, in regard to their coverage and the possibilities and limitations of each database, in addition to instructions for performing the searches (Boolean operators, truncation or wildcards, proximity, etc.). The following databases may be noted:

OEPMPAT of the Spanish Office of Patents and Brands. It contains bibliographic document data on Patents and Utility Models transacted by the Industrial Property Statute and the new Patents Law of 20 March 1986, as well as the European Patents and the applications via PCT, which designate Spain. It includes both patent applications and patent awards. It allows printing out full patent documents. http://www.oepm.es/bases-documentales/invenes_sp?ACTION=RETOUR

Patent Full-Text and Full-Page Image Databases, of the United States Patents and Trademark Office. It contains two differentiated databases: PatFT, featuring the patents awarded and published since 1790, and AppFT, which contains the patent applications since March 2001. It allows access to the full text of the document with hyperlinks to the American patents mentioned and the documents that cite a given patent. Patent images can also be printed. http://www.uspto.gov/patft/index.html

ESP@CENET. This name stands for a service that contains several databases which have different sources (national offices and international organisations) and coverage. In January 2004, esp@cenet featured 45 million patents from 71 countries; 24.2 million had an English title, 18.3 million had a European classification (ECLA) and 7.1 million had an English summary.

http://es.espacenet.com/search97cgi/s97_cgi.exe?Action=FormGen&Template=es/ES/home.hts

- EP-esp@cenet. This allows searching and visualising the bibliographic data on the patent applications published by the European Patent Office in the last two years in any Member State of the European Patent Organisation.
- WIPO-esp@cenet. This database contains bibliographic data on the patent applications published by the World Intellectual Property Organization, WIPO (WO publications), in the last 24 months.
- Patent Abstracts of Japan contains the summaries of the Japanese patent applications since 1976. This database is updated monthly; however, due to the translation process, data are not available until six months after the applications are published.
- Worldwide contains information on the patent applications submitted in over 70 countries and regions.

Finally, to perform the consultation it is necessary to define clearly the information need and to elaborate an appropriate search strategy, which, once it has been translated into the query language of the selected database, allows the relevant documents to be obtained thoroughly and accurately, just pinpointing those that match the information need.

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