

A patent success

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A European project has created a powerful patent search service for SMEs. It is a major step forward as patents and patent information are extremely valuable.

We live in a knowledge economy, and patents are the legal tender. They define a company's or individual's stake and they are the mechanism by which ideas can be both exchanged and, at the same time, protected.

But getting patent information can be difficult. There are many databases scattered across Europe and the rest of the world, and the search options are limited: they are either cheap but restricted, or effective but very expensive. You must either go through each source for information, or pay hefty fees to a specialist who does it for you.

That leaves SMEs, the majority of Europe's enterprises, in a bind: either they struggle with the awkward, difficult and time-consuming cheaper search (which ends up costing money in any case because of the time personnel must devote to the work), or they incur serious costs using professionals.

Unsuspected value

The final option is to ignore patents altogether, but this is a costly option, too. Costly in terms of the lost opportunities, as most SMEs don't even begin to suspect the value of the information discovered through patent searches.

Innovall, an eTEN-funded project, is keen to see SMEs not miss out on the value of patenting and patent knowledge.

For example, one company that participated in the Innovall project, a tyre manufacturer, sought a solution to a problem it was having with waste rubber extruded through the mould during the manufacturing process. By using Innovall's search service the tyre company discovered a useful patent in the baking industry of all things.

“It shows how useful and valuable information can be discovered, even if it relates to a completely different industry,” explains Alfredo Silva, coordinator of the Innovall project.

Google for patents

Innovall was set up to explore the best way to make patent search simple. The solution was to create a web portal that essentially acts as the Google for patents. The search engine connects with eight large databases, with hundreds of thousands of patent records.

There are three layers of search that companies can choose from. The most basic level is the ‘function’ search, which looks for patents in terms of what they do. This may be basic, but it is also very powerful, as the example of the tyre company shows.

Even better, Innovall has used ontologies, which are dictionaries that translate different terms to help define a search. “For example, you might be looking for a friction device, but the system will also search for words like drag, brake, decelerate and so on,” explains Silva.

That's just the beginning. A ‘company’ search will look up all the patents registered by one company, a competitor perhaps, and it will list information such as what country, branch or even department submitted

the patent. Finally, Innovall can search by ‘product name’, completing the range of services.

The results take a bit longer than a standard Google search, but given the nature of the search, this is to be expected.

Keen hunters

The 60 organisations - and hundreds of individuals within them - who are currently actively testing the system are very enthusiastic about the results and the information that Innovall retrieves.

These ‘testers’ will be a key part of the next step. Innovall hopes to convert them to a core group of users of the service when it goes live in earnest. This will boost efforts to commercialise the service, because it must become sustainable if it is going to survive.

Right now, Innovall is considering a variety of business models. One plan is to leave the ‘function’ service free, and then charge tiered subscriptions for more detailed or specific searches.

For now, the project will continue to perfect the technology until March 2009, when they hope to have their business plans finalised and ready for prime time.

“This is a very important service,” says Silva. “It fills a glaring gap in current offerings, it empowers SMEs to get to grips with patents, and it offers the potential to boost European competitiveness.”

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