Social patents: Using online social networks to handle patent applications

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Experts in intellectual property and patents explain in a forthcoming issue of the *International Journal of Technology Transfer and Commercialisation* how tools, such as online social networking could be used to eradicate the enormous backlog of patent applications in the US.

Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace allow visitors to create networks of friends and contacts, upload images, music, videos, and news stories. Members can discuss, blog, and rate different media on such sites and provide useful feedback to the content creators. Analyzing social networks can uncover patterns of interaction between people and reveal what is important and well-ranked in a given group, or community.

Inherent to such social networking systems is the ability of community members to comment on individual submissions and so provide an additional stream of feedback and also to interact or connect with other members of niche groups of members. Frank Peo, Daniel Lorence, Robert Jameson, James Chin, and Luis Gonzales at the Center for Technology Assessment, University Park, Pennsylvania, explain how such a social networking community can be used to identify prior art in patent applications.

"The burgeoning backlog of patent applications at the US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), several hundred thousand in any year, has created an urgent need for Office reform," the team explains, "Review of related application reference material, or prior art, is a necessary but

time-consuming step in the patent process." If prior art can be identified early in the assessment process then a patent claim can be discarded quickly and the patent examiner move on to the next claim.

Peo and colleagues explain how the USPTO initiated a pilot project that uses social networking software to allow groups of volunteer review experts to upload prior art references, participate in discussion forums, rate other user submissions and add research references to pending applications. The aim was to allow the actual patent examiners to focus on reviewing the most relevant prior art associated with any particular submission and so streamline the overall application process.

The Peer-to-Patent pilot project has been demonstrated as a promising approach to streamlining patent applications. Similar approaches are now being investigated by the UK Intellectual Property Office and the European Patent Office.

More information: "Using social networking methods for analysis of patent prior art: the peer-to-patent experiment" by Frank Peo, Daniel Lorence, Robert Jameson, James Chin, and Luis Gonzales in International Journal of Technology Transfer and Commercialisation, 2009, 8, 88-97

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