

Patent Classification Through the Ages

Submitted by Joan Goodbody (CSD)

Forms of classification for scientific reasons have been around from at least the Fourth Century BC when Aristotle used a system to classify organisms. Using a classification system for patents has been in practice since shortly after the US patent system originated. At first, it was used to place the models and applications in groups based on general topics, thus allowing examiners and staff to efficiently search.

By 1830, the US established 16 broad classification categories. In 1836, the New Patent Act included the first statutory mention of a patent classification system. It directed the Commissioner of Patents to "cause to be classified and arranged..." the models and applications. By 1878, the number of classes grew to 158.

In the 19th century, other countries also developed patent classification systems. The German Patent Office put a class on their patents as early as 1877. By 1880, the UK had their own classification system.

In 1900, Examiner Skinner was instructed to publish the "Plan of Classification of Patented Inventions." This became the basis for the United States Patent Classification (USPC) system from that point forward. The plan specified that "articles of manufacture will be grouped according to their function or use... not to select a specific or limited function as the basis of classification where the articles are capable of a broader use." The US thus moved to grouping according to function or use. Before that, the groupings were based on broad categories such as agriculture, boating, and other categories.

In the 1960's, the use of more advanced technology drove classification. The US developed the Manual-Access Patent Information Techniques (MAPIT) system. By 1970, the Europeans developed and implemented the European Classification (ECLA) system. By 1971, the International Patent Classification (IPC) became a world-wide system

under the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) when the Strasbourg agreement was adopted.

This allowed classification to expand and develop into a comprehensive system, making searching and finding documents less cumbersome. By 1977, Japan developed online searching capabilities. In 1985, ECLA introduced a system that incorporated online searching and during that same year, Japan went to a paperless office.

After these advancement leaps, the world had to catch up with Japan and Europe. A new era of patent classification started in 2006 when WIPO announced major IPC reforms.

The US became a major part of the worldwide effort, when in 2010, USPTO Director David Kappos (US) and President Benoit Battistelli (EPO) signed an agreement to form the Cooperative Patent Classification (CPC) system based on ECLA and IPC. In January 2013, CPC was launched.

The US commitment to international classification and creating a cooperative atmosphere has continued since CPC launched. This includes the creation of the Office of International Patent Cooperation (DCIPC) in 2014, which in turn, developed classification divisions that hired numerous patent classifiers and other management experts to help improve and expand CPC and IPC to make them exemplary for worldwide use.

Continued on next page

Patent CLASSIFICATION TIMELINE

