

# USPTO TO PROVIDE ELECTRONIC ACCESS TO CITED U.S. PATENT REFERENCES WITH OFFICE ACTIONS AND CEASE SUPPLYING PAPER COPIES

## Summary

In support of its 21<sup>st</sup> Century Strategic Plan goal of increased patent e-Government, beginning in June 2004, the United States Patent and Trademark Office (Office or USPTO) will begin the phase-in of its E-Patent Reference program and hence will: (1) provide downloading capability of the U.S. patents and U.S. patent application publications cited in Office actions via the E-Patent Reference feature of the Office's Patent Application Information Retrieval (PAIR) system; and (2) cease mailing paper copies of U.S. patents and U.S. patent application publications with office actions **except** for citations made during the international stage of an international application under the Patent Cooperation Treaty (PCT). In order to use the new E-Patent Reference feature applicants must: (1) obtain a digital certificate and software from the Office; (2) obtain a customer number from the Office; and (3) properly associate patent applications with the customer number. Alternatively, copies of all U.S. patents and U.S. patent application publications can be accessed without a digital certificate from the USPTO web site, from the USPTO Office of Public Records, and from commercial sources. The Office will continue the practice of supplying paper copies of foreign patent documents and non-patent literature with Office actions. Paper copies of cited references will continue to be provided by the USPTO for international applications under the PCT during the international stage.

## Deployment of E-Patent Reference System

The USPTO will deploy the full E-Patent Reference program starting in June of 2004. In accordance with the schedule shown below, paper copies of cited U.S. patents and U.S. patent application publications will cease to be mailed to applicants with Office actions in the indicated Technology Centers (TCs). Paper copies of foreign patents and non-patent literature will continue to be included with office actions.

### Schedule

June 2004	TCs 1600, 1700, 2800 and 2900
July 2004	TCs 3600 and 3700
August 2004	TCs 2100 and 2600

## Description of E-Patent Reference System

On December 1, 2003, the Office made available a new feature in the Office's Private PAIR system, E-Patent Reference, to allow convenient downloading and printing of cited U.S. patents and U.S. patent application publications. A notice announcing this system was published in the Official Gazette, (*see Notice of Office Plan to Cease Supplying Copies of Cited U.S. Patent References With Office Actions, and Pilot to Evaluate The Alternative of Providing Electronic*

*Access to Such U.S. Patent References*, 1277 *Off. Gaz. Pat. Office* 156 (Dec. 23, 2003)). The same notice also announced the Office's future plan to cease supplying copies of cited U.S. patents and patent application publications with Office actions.

The E-Patent Reference system allows an authorized user of Private PAIR to download the U.S. patents and U.S. patent application publications cited on a form PTO-892 in Office actions, as well as U.S. patents and U.S. patent application publications submitted by applicants as part of an information disclosure statement (IDS) on form PTO/SB/08 (1449). The retrieval of some or all of the documents is performed in one downloading step with each of the documents encoded as Adobe Portable Document format (.pdf) files.

The E-Patent Reference system was used by applicants during a pilot program in December 2003 and January 2004. In response to some technical issues discovered by users, changes to make the system more compatible with users' firewalls and office systems were made during the pilot.

Consequently, applicants should expect to start receiving Office actions (in patent applications and during patent reexamination proceedings) without paper copies of cited U.S. patents and U.S. patent application publications in accordance with the schedule above. These documents will be available through the E-Patent Reference system for downloading using Private PAIR. Foreign patents and non-patent literature will continue to be provided to the applicant on paper. Communications from the Office during the international stage of an international application under the PCT will continue to include paper copies of all references, including U.S. patents and U.S. patent application publications.

***In summary, all U.S. patents and patent application publications are available on the USPTO web site, from the Office of Public Records and from commercial sources. Additionally, a simple system for downloading the cited U.S. patents and patent application publications has been established for applicants, called the E-Patent Reference system. As E-Patent Reference and Private PAIR require participating applicants to have a customer number, retrieval software and a digital certificate, all applicants are strongly encouraged to contact the Patent Electronic Business Center to acquire these items. To be ready to use this system by June 1, 2004, contact the Patent EBC as soon as possible.***

### **Steps to Use the E-Patent Reference Feature**

Access to Private PAIR is required to utilize E-Patent Reference. If you do not already have access to Private PAIR, the Office urges practitioners and applicants not represented by a practitioner to: (1) obtain a no-cost USPTO Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) digital certificate; (2) obtain a USPTO customer number; (3) associate all of their pending and new application filings with their customer number; (4) install free software (supplied by the Office) required to access Private PAIR and the E-Patent Reference; and (5) make appropriate arrangements for Internet access.

### **Instructions for performing the 5 steps:**

**Step 1:** Full instructions for obtaining a **PKI digital certificate** are available at the Office's Electronic Business Center (EBC) web page at: <http://www.uspto.gov/ebc/downloads.html>. Note that a notarized signature will be required to obtain a digital certificate.

**Step 2:** To get a **Customer Number**, download and complete the Customer Number Request form, PTO-SB/125, at: <http://www.uspto.gov/web/forms/sb0125.pdf>. The completed form can then be transmitted by facsimile to the Patent Electronic Business Center at (703) 308-2840, or mailed to the address on the form. If you are a registered attorney or agent, then your registration number must be associated with your customer number. This association is accomplished by adding your registration number to the Customer Number Request form.

**Step 3:** A description of associating a customer number with the **correspondence address** of an application is described at the EBC Web page at: [http://www.uspto.gov/ebc/registration\\_pair.html](http://www.uspto.gov/ebc/registration_pair.html).

**Step 4:** The **software** for electronic filing is available for downloading at [www.uspto.gov/ebc](http://www.uspto.gov/ebc). Users can also contact the EFS Help Desk at (703) 305-3028 and request a copy of the software on compact disc. Users will also need Adobe Acrobat Reader, which is available through a link from the USPTO web site.

**Step 5: Internet** access will be required which applicants may obtain through a supplier of their own choice. As images of large documents must be downloaded, high-speed Internet access is recommended.

The E-Patent Reference feature is accessed using a button on the Private PAIR screen. Ordinarily all of the cited U.S. patent and U.S. patent application publication references will be available over the Internet using the Office's new E-Patent Reference feature. The size of the references to be downloaded will be displayed by E-Patent Reference so the download time can be estimated. Applicants and registered practitioners can select to download all of the references or any combination of cited references. Selected references will be downloaded as complete documents in the Portable Document Format (.pdf). The downloaded documents can be viewed and printed using Adobe's Acrobat Reader program and other software.

### **Other Options**

The E-Patent Reference function requires the applicant to use the secure Private PAIR system, which establishes confidential communications with the applicant. Applicants using this facility must receive a digital certificate, as described above. Other options for obtaining patents which do not require the digital certificate include the USPTO's free Patents on the Web program (<http://www.uspto.gov/patft/index.html>). The USPTO's Office of Public Records also supplies copies of patents and patent application publications for a fee (<http://ebiz1.uspto.gov/oems25p/index.html>). Commercial sources also provide patents and patent application publications.

Section 707.05(a) of the Manual of Patent Examining Procedure, which currently provides that copies of cited references are in general automatically furnished without charge to applicant

together with the Office action in which they are cited, will be revised in due course for consistency with the practice announced in this notice.

## Comments

The Office published a notice announcing its plan to cease supplying copies of cited U.S. patent references with Office actions, (*see Notice of Office Plan to Cease Supplying Copies of Cited U.S. Patent References With Office Actions, and Pilot to Evaluate The Alternative of Providing Electronic Access to Such U.S. Patent References*, 1277 *Off. Gaz. Pat. Office* 156 (Dec. 23, 2003)). The Office received numerous comments in response to this notice. A summary of representative comments and the Office's responses to the comment, grouped by topics, follows:

**Comment 1:** The requirement to use the Office's customer number/digital certificate shifts the responsibility of producing paper copies to the applicant. A number of comments indicated that adopting the proposal would result in an increased responsibility for the applicant, as the applicant or applicant's representative would be required to print the references.

**Response:** The USPTO is implementing the E-Patent Reference program as part of the Office's e-Government initiative and to align funding priorities to the Patent Initiatives, including the hiring of examiners. Applicants can purchase copies of U.S. patents and patent application publications from a variety of vendors if they choose not to print copies through the E-Patent Reference system.

The USPTO is moving toward electronic filing and processing of both patent applications and trademark applications. The policy announced in this notice is simply a step towards a more fully automated patent examination process. By analogy, briefs and court opinions that include case citations do **not** include paper copies of the cited cases. Rather, the cited cases are available via books or electronic databases. Similarly, the USPTO will no longer provide paper copies of U.S. patents and patent application publications since they are available electronically free of charge. Finally, this change will avoid duplication and waste since an applicant may not need to print out every page of a cited U.S. patent or patent application publication.

**Comment 2:** Adopting the proposal would hurt the solo practitioners and *pro se* applicants the most, which is unfair.

**Response:** The solo practitioners and *pro se* applicants have the same electronic access as the larger firms and corporations, available instantaneously over the Internet. If a solo practitioner or a *pro se* applicant chooses not to print copies of U.S. patents and patent applications publications through the USPTO Patents on the Web system or through the E-Patent Reference system, commercial sources that provide patents very quickly and inexpensively are available, and copies of U.S. patents and patent application publications are also available at the Patent and Trademark Depository Libraries (PTDLs). Additionally, the cost of patents if ordered from the USPTO Office of Public Records is very reasonable (\$3).

**Comment 3:** Some applicants indicated that the service is reliable and quick, and consistent with the electronic commerce initiatives in their law firms and businesses.

