

Intellectual property: The new competitive edge in an ever-changing world

Although the pandemic has been a great disruptor, it has also been a powerful accelerator, encouraging many companies and countries to re-imagine growth strategies; IP can be a powerful tool for growth and development.

Daren Tang

The Ukraine war, global inflation and disruptions to food and energy supplies are rattling economies and financial markets, creating much uncertainty even as countries attempt to return to post-coronavirus normalcy.

Despite these challenging times, data collected by the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo) shows that innovation activities continue to grow, powering even more economies and enterprises around the world.

International patent applications filed through Wipo reached their highest level in 2021, surpassing the 275,000 mark for the first time, while global trademark and design applications via Wipo also saw double-digit growth of 15 per cent and 21 per cent respectively. Filings at national IP offices also saw record growth, especially in the area of trademarks, as brands moved into

digital spaces.

Why is this so? Although the pandemic has been a great disruptor, it has also been a powerful accelerator, encouraging many companies and countries to re-imagine growth strategies. The answer is increasingly to turn to entrepreneurship, innovation and digitalisation – areas where IP plays a critical role in success. As a result, more and more countries, including emerging economies, are looking to use IP as a powerful tool for growth and development.

DIVERSE ENGINES DRIVING INNOVATION

Not surprisingly, innovations in computer, digital and medical technology took the lion's share of patent filings in 2021, accounting for around a quarter of all applications. But what is interesting – and significant – is that the engines of innovation are becoming truly global.

Data from Wipo reveals that seven out of 10 IP applications are now taking place in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Venture capital investment more than quadrupled in Africa and Latin America over the past 12 months to US\$3 billion (S\$4.1 billion) and US\$16 billion (S\$22.2 billion) respectively.

Close to 50 countries, including Ecuador, Indonesia, Lithuania, Malaysia, Senegal and Thailand, now boast a start-up that has achieved unicorn status. A decade ago, the number stood at just five. And the countries that are making the strongest improvements in Wipo's Global Innovation Index include Turkey, Vietnam, India and the Philippines.

All these developments are good for the world – we need more innovation than ever to help us achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals and to harness human ingenuity for the good of all.

TRANSFORMING THE GLOBAL IP ECOSYSTEM

With innovation becoming a key driver of growth around the world, Wipo has been transforming itself from a technical agency into a developmental agency. Our mission is to help our 193 members use IP as a powerful catalyst for jobs, investments, business growth, economic development and social vibrancy.

We are building a more inclusive global IP ecosystem, focusing on youth, women, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and communities that have traditionally been under-served by the IP community. We are also deploying our expertise and tools to help find and deploy innovative solutions to global challenges like climate change.

Given these, supporting start-ups and SMEs to use IP for business growth has become a key feature of our work. SMEs play a critical role in the global economy, accounting for 90 per cent of all companies in the world, employing 70 per cent of the global labour force as well as generating up to half of global gross domestic product.

Since its launch in November last year, Wipo's IP diagnostics tool has helped more than 3,500 business owners from around the world understand their IP assets and

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how they are connected to business strategy. The tool has also generated over 1,000 personalised reports and been translated into the six UN languages, with more to be added soon.

Wipo is also developing a programme to help SMEs and innovators streamline the patent application process and demystify the patent approval process. The programme will speed up the process of turning an idea into a tangible product that can be produced at scale. It will be applied to green technologies and life-saving food aid, increasing the rate at which inventors can commercialise their IP and bring products to market.

In Singapore, Wipo recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Singapore Manufacturing Federation (SMF) and the Singapore Innovation and Productivity Institute that will help SMF members understand IP from a business angle and use it as part of their growth strategy.

Similar programmes are being launched around the world to bring IP from the clouds to the ground. With Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, we are delivering a new project to support 32 women in Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) careers through a tailor-made training and mentorship programme that develops practical IP skills in areas such as biotechnology, engineering and chemistry.

In Uganda and Jordan, we have piloted projects that help female entrepreneurs use IP to better brand, market and package their products, pivoting away from seminars and workshops to programmes that create greater, more tangible and longer-lasting impact at the grassroots level.

CONNECTING WITH THE YOUNG

Engaging with youth is another key priority for Wipo. Young people are not only our future innovators, creators and entrepreneurs, but they are a large part of the population in developing regions such as Africa, where 65 per cent of the population is under 30.

Youth are hungry to pick up IP skills and knowledge that can bring their ideas to the market. This is why we are developing a regional youth entrepreneurship mentorship programme to equip young African entrepreneurs with IP skills to boost their businesses.

At the same time, the Wipo Academy, which trained 270,000 people from around the world in the past two years and which recently welcomed its millionth participant, will continue to broaden its curriculum. We now offer practical courses, including "IP for start-ups" and "IP for app and video game producers" that are targeted at business owners, entrepreneurs and innovators, instead of just IP specialists and professionals.

We have also launched Wipo's first ever young experts programme, which will groom the next generation of global IP and innovation leaders through a two-year work programme at Wipo that deepens their IP knowledge and develops their leadership skills. The inaugural batch of 11 young experts is already undergoing the programme and we will be launching applications for next year's intake soon.

On the environmental front, we have stepped up our work in Wipo Green – an online platform for technology exchange to support global efforts to address climate change. Wipo Green has close to 130,000 technology offerings in different areas. One of the recent successful matches concerns the Japanese cosmetics firm Shiseido, which licensed one of its technologies listed on the Wipo Green database to help students at Toyo University develop a hand serum that is environmentally friendly.

Finally, the upshot in an uncertain and volatile world is that IP gives innovative businesses and entrepreneurs a new competitive edge and is key to finding innovative solutions for our common global challenges.

The story of innovation over the past two years has been one of surprising resilience and increasing globalisation, and the time has come to develop tangible initiatives that will bring the benefits of IP to the ground in every part of the world. This will ensure that IP and innovation spur economic growth and development and help innovators and creators from anywhere bring their ideas to the world.

• Daren Tang, who is Wipo's director-general, will deliver keynote remarks at the Global Forum on Intellectual Property on Tuesday which is being held in conjunction with IP Week @SG 2022



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