

WIPO



IPC/SEM/98/6

ORIGINAL: English

DATE: November 20, 1998

E

WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANIZATION
GENEVA

**ADVANCED SEMINAR
ON THE INTERNATIONAL PATENT CLASSIFICATION
(IPC)**

Newport, United Kingdom, December 7 to 11, 1998

**CLASSIFICATION AND THE FUTURE OF THE IPC –
THE EPO VIEW**

*Lecture presented by Mr. Jürgen Rampelmann, Head, Classification Section,
European Patent Office, Rijswijk, Netherlands*

Table of Contents

1.Introduction.....	1
2.Is patent classification necessary?	1
3.Classification at the EPO	2
3.1 The schemes.....	2
3.1.1 The International Patent Classification (IPC)	2
3.1.2 The European Classification (ECLA)	3
3.1.3 Indexing Schemes	5
3.2 Use of the schemes	6
3.2.1 ECLA and ICO.....	6
3.2.2 IPC.....	7
3.2.3 Other schemes.....	7
3.3 Inter-office cooperation of the EPO in the field of classification	8
3.3.1 IPC Revision.....	8
3.3.2 Use of ECLA by other patent offices and other external users	8
4.Does the EPO need the IPC?.....	9
5.Should the IPC be revised?	9
6.The IPC revision procedure.....	10
6.1 The IPC Committee of Experts (IPC/CE)	10
6.2 The revision working groups (IPC/CE/M, IPC/CE/C and IPC/CE/E).....	11
6.3 Rules of Procedure and Communication Methods.....	12
6.4 The Conciliation Board (IPC/CE/CB)	12
7.Conclusion.....	13

1. Introduction

1998 is an important year for the International Patent Classification (IPC). First of all, in October 1998 the 27th session of the IPC Committee of Experts took place, in which the seventh edition of the IPC could be finalised. Secondly, due to major reorganisations at WIPO, the organisation of the IPC revision work was transferred back from the PCIPI to the IPC Union.

This situation gave reason to the IPC Committee of Experts in its 26th session in March 1998, to consider how to proceed with the IPC and its revision process in the future. In order to allow an exchange of opinion between offices and also to hear other IPC users on these issues, the Committee decided to organise this IPC Advanced Seminar.

In the light of this development and with regard to the growing importance of the EPO classification (ECLA) for the EPO itself and other users, the EPO sees an opportunity to present its view on the issues of the future of the IPC and its revision procedure. Naturally, this view is largely influenced by the EPO's classification and documentation policy and its impact on the way in which EPO examiners carry out their patent searches. Therefore, for an understanding about the EPO position in classification matters it is important to know how classification is seen and dealt with in the EPO.

2. Is patent classification necessary?

Classification is the intellectual identification of information (in a document) and the assignment of a retrievable marker to that information. Whether classification is necessary in the future, has to be investigated in the light of the new working methods applied in patent searching. Two aspects characterise the new working methods. By means of search engines, the information is exclusively retrieved electronically from databases. The information display tool is the screen, in due time replacing completely the paper documentation as a carrier for the search.

Quality and productivity of patent searching in electronic document collections are largely influenced by two factors, the availability (completeness) of data and the retrievability of the information. Full text databases as the replacement of the paper collections are an unstructured data source. The advantage of this source is its completeness. Completeness allows searching in detail (qualitative aspect). The disadvantage of this data source is its low structure. Text searching as the only means to access the information quickly and precisely is difficult (quantitative aspect). Specific parts of the information may not be present in the text, but only in drawings. Features may be described in unspecific language. The use of synonyms is difficult, in particular because of the need to search in databases of different languages. Examples for difficult search topics are processes, layers/laminates or three-dimensional arrangement or movement of constructive parts in respect to each other. The creator and provider of the full text information is the applicant. The applicant in his role as information provider forms part of a very heterogeneous group. As a consequence, the presentation standard of the information provided by the applicants is not always on a sufficiently high and reliable level.

The conclusion is that online word searching making only use of an unstructured source of (full text) data is not efficient. It gives incomplete results (insufficient "recall") and it requires a high investment of time to sort out overflowing ("noisy") search results (insufficient "precision").

The answer to the problem described above is to create an artificial structure for the document collection by means of classification which is controlled by the user of the documentation. In assigning the classification task to the professional patent searcher, the examiner, the quality of the documentation structure benefits fully from the expert's search experience in the technical field. With classification, all types of information contained in documents can be marked, once identified by the classifier. This intellectual investment before the search allows the use of technically well-defined sets of documents during the search. These sets may then successfully serve as the starting point for full-text oriented searches. With the described approach, satisfying results are achieved in productivity (time spent per search) and quality (retrieval of the most relevant state of the art).

3. Classification at the EPO

As a consequence of the view presented above, the maintenance of the systematic search documentation is assigned to the search examiners of DG 1 as one important part of their basic tasks. This task includes the following activities:

- official classification of EP-publications, and official classification of the PCT-publications searched at the EPO in its function as International Searching Authority of the PCT
- internal classification of new patent documents and important non-patent literature for filing in the systematic search documentation
- improvement of the efficiency of the systematic search documentation by reorganising technical fields according to additional technical requirements

Different classification and indexing schemes are used and maintained to carry out the above-mentioned activities.

3.1 The schemes

3.1.1 The International Patent Classification (IPC)

Official patent publications of the EPO are classified according to the edition of the IPC currently in force. To carry out this activity, every examiner is provided with the necessary volumes of the IPC. Next to that, the current IPC is available online as a database installed in the online retrieval environment EPOQUE/BNS. For improved information in combination with online searching of patent abstract databases, the older versions of IPC 1 to 5 were also made available as online databases.

3.1.2 The European Classification (ECLA)

The basis for efficient access to the search documentation of the EPO is the European Classification (ECLA). The development of ECLA started in the early 1970s at the former Institut International des Brevets (IIB) in The Hague. This patent search authority used the old Dutch classification scheme called IdT ("Indeling der Techniek") for the structure of its search documentation.

After 1968, when the first edition of the International Patent Classification came into force, the IIB decided to transfer its old classification scheme into a scheme based on the philosophy set out in the IPC. Due to the limited resources available for the reorganisation of the documentation involved, it was further decided to use a continuous approach in two steps. First of all, depending upon actual capacity available, individual groups of the old IdT scheme were closed and new groups in the IPC-type scheme created. This scheme would later become the European Classification. From the closing date on, the closed groups were no longer used for the classification of new documents. In a second step, the backlog of these groups was transferred by individual reclassification or reorganisation in groups.

With the integration of the IIB into the EPO, the old and the new classification tools of the IIB were taken over. The EPO continued the reorganisation from the old to the new scheme. In 1991, the last groups were closed, meaning that from that year on, all new documents have been classified according to the ECLA scheme. The reclassification of the backlog is an ongoing procedure, forming part of the regular documentation activity of the examiners. At the beginning of 1998, about 11,500 groups of the IdT scheme were still in use for searching. These groups contain about 1,700,000 documents. These groups of documents are related to about 37,000 groups in the ECLA scheme. Therefore, these 37,000 groups have to be considered as incomplete, in so far as part of the older documents is still in the related IdT groups.

The structure of ECLA

The principal philosophy of ECLA is based on the IPC. However, search experience at the IIB and later at the EPO showed that there was a need for a dynamic classification system, being rapidly adaptable to the needs of the search. Therefore, ECLA is continuously being revised to meet the needs of an efficient search tool. ECLA differs in three ways from the IPC:

- ❑ Classification entries of the IPC which are too wide, i.e. attracting too many documents because of high activity in the technological field concerned, are further subdivided. In other words, more subgroups are created internally for technical features forming part of the concept of the covering IPC group.
- ❑ IPC classification entries which are considered unsuitable for efficient searching because of unclear or out-of-date definition of technical concepts are used after modification of their scope or, preferably, not used at all.

- ❑ The modification of the scope of places, e.g. by creation of subgroups or addition of references, is usually followed by immediate reorganisation of the backlog of the related documentation. In other words, unlike the IPC, ECLA exists only in one edition, the current one, and the structure of the systematic search documentation of the EPO is reflected by that ECLA edition.

This concept of definitions leads to the following types of groups when comparing ECLA and IPC:

- ❑ IPC groups in force in the current IPC edition AND used in ECLA (ECLA symbol = IPC symbol)
- ❑ IPC groups in force in the current IPC edition NOT used in ECLA (ECLA warning list after the subclass title giving a broad indication where the material covered by the "not used" IPC groups is classified internally)
- ❑ IPC groups no longer in force in the current IPC edition, but still used in ECLA (IPC edition indication in the text of the ECLA group)
- ❑ Internal ECLA subgroups not forming part of the IPC (ECLA symbol = IPC symbol + internal letter-digit-letter addition, text in square brackets)

The dynamic development of ECLA

New documents. As already mentioned, one important task of the search examiners is the internal classification of new patent documents for their inclusion in the systematic search documentation. To that effect, all incoming new patent documents (normally restricted to one document per patent family) are circulated amongst the examiners. The IPC classification printed on the documents as given by the respective patent offices is used as circulation parameter. Examiners decide whether and where the documents have to be classified in their technical fields. On top of that, they may decide that further circulation to potentially interested colleagues in neighbouring fields is necessary.

The classification symbol of the internal classification are entered in the central documentation database DOCDB (EPODOC on the retrieval side). After that, the documents are filed in the paper search groups. On average over the last years, each document received two classifications.

Since mid 1998, the examiners use the CLIPON software (Classifying Incoming Patents Online) to directly enter the classification symbols into the computer. The CLIPON system handles the document distribution completely electronically and allows an immediate update of the documentation database with the new classification data. It is expected that in relatively short time, this system will completely replace the paper circulation and the centralised classification data entry.

Reorganisations. A very important documentation activity of the search examiners is the maintenance of the systematic documentation with the aim to retain or even improve the quality standard and the search efficiency of the search groups. Improvement is possible in two ways:

- ❑ further subdivision of groups to reduce the number of documents to be consulted for a given technical feature; and
- ❑ reorganisation of documents between existing groups after redefinition of the scope of groups in order to improve consistency and to reduce overlap.

Examiners use the DOCTOOL software, the predecessor of CLIPON and now integrated with it into one tool, for the manipulation of classification symbols of documents for reorganisation purposes. In 1997, about 470,000 documents were reclassified, partly with DOCTOOL, partly via central data entry routines.

The size of ECLA

In 1997, about 900 ECLA modification requests were submitted by examiners requesting the introduction of about 2,000 new groups, 440 deletions of groups and about 1500 other modifications.

At the end of 1997, ECLA contained about 120,000 groups compared to 67,000 groups in the sixth edition of the IPC. Of this total, about 83,000 groups are complete. The other 37,000 groups are still linked to the 11,5000 IdT groups which, although closed for new documents, still have to be consulted for the search.

3.1.3 Indexing Schemes

Experience in patent searching at the EPO proved the success of a consistent classification tool. However, it also showed its limitations, in particular when applied to a paper document collection. One example is the limited success of fine subdivisions. On the one hand, fine breakdowns are necessary in order to manage the number of documents to be searched. On the other hand, there is the growing danger of losing unclassified parts of information contained in the documents, or of having to file multiple copies of one and the same document instead. The answer to such "hard copy" classification are "soft" tools which do not require the physical filing of documents. Another, perhaps more important example is the desired distinction between different levels of information contained in documents, for example claimed matter versus additional information disclosed in the description.

Indexing codes are an example of such "soft" tools. The current standard indexing system of the EPO is the light indexing system ICO (In Computer Only). The idea of ICO is to identify bits of secondary information in a document by allotting a symbol to it. The ICO system is an indexing scheme structured similarly to the ECLA classification scheme and the definition of the individual indexing codes is closely related to particular areas of ECLA. Mainly two different types of indexing codes are available:

- ❑ codes which differ completely in their definition from the classification symbols of the technically related area of the classification scheme; an important example of this type of indexing code is the identification of applications in a function-oriented classification field; and
- ❑ codes which have the same meaning as the classification symbols; they are used when the information to be indexed is only of secondary importance and should therefore not be classified (so-called "universal" indexing schemes)

The maintenance, i.e. creation, amendment, deletion, of ICO indexing schemes is carried out by the search examiners in a way similar to the ECLA schemes. In 1997, about 5,800 new indexing code definitions were introduced bringing the total number of indexing codes in the ICO schemes to about 46,000.

The examiners use CLIPON/DOCTOOL for manipulating ICO symbols on the documents in the same way as for the ECLA symbols. In 1997, about 369,000 ICO indexing codes were allotted to documents.

3.2 Use of the schemes

The different classification schemes described above are used primarily for patent searches, of course. Next to that, they serve also for administrative purposes. Another important aspect of the use of the schemes is the part of the document collection to which they are applied.

3.2.1 ECLA and ICO

Search

ECLA and ICO cover the patent documentation of the following countries and regional offices: AP, AT (first filing of residents only), AU (first filing of residents only), BE, CA (first filing of residents only), CH, DE, EP, FR, GB, LU, NL, OA, US, WO. In other words, new documents falling under this definition are classified according to ECLA as soon as possible after publication. However, in order to limit the amount of classification work, a computerised family linking system brings together documents having the same priority, of which only one, usually the first one to arrive at the EPO, is classified intellectually. The classification given is then forwarded to the other family members. Additionally, in terms of a paper handling, only the intellectually classified document is filed into the systematic paper collection.

In some technical fields, non-patent literature (NPL) forms a relevant part of the documentation to be consulted during the search. Therefore, important NPL is systematically reviewed and offered to examiners in form of preclassified articles. These articles are then classified using ECLA and ICO. Currently, the document collection contains about 2.6 million articles classified according to ECLA. In order to be able to handle the NPL articles electronically in a way similar to patent documents, the "country code" XP was defined for this part of the document collection.

Administration

On the side of the administrative management of the patent search activities of the EPO, ECLA symbol ranges are used to assign technical fields to examiners, to handle authorisation levels and document distribution lists in CLIPON/DOCTOOL and to give information about the physical location of the various parts of the paper collection.

3.2.2 IPC

Search

As part of the PCT minimum documentation, English language abstracts of the JP and SU/RU patent documents also belong to the obligatory search collection. However, they are not systematically classified according to ECLA. Examiners who want to use classification symbols to limit the search in this part of the documentation, have to use IPC (in Derwent file WPI for SU/RU abstracts and in EPOQUE file PAJ for JP abstracts). For the JP abstract collection, this aspect will change its focus in the future with the growing availability of the classification and indexing schemes of the Japanese patent office for EPO examiners.

Administration

The EPO uses the IPC printed on patent documents for distribution of the documents to examiners for classification according to ECLA. In the past, this distribution was carried out on basis of paper documents sent to examiners in so-called classification folders. For example in 1997, about 191.000 documents were sent to the examiners using the IPC as a preliminary "address". Currently a transition to the computerised CLIPON system takes place which will replace the paper circulation.

3.2.3 Other schemes

Next to the schemes described above, EPO examiners make use of other classification and indexing schemes when appropriate in the technical field and when available at the examiner's desktop. Examples for such schemes are the US classification key and the F-terms of the Japanese patent office, as well as commercial index systems made available internally via bilateral contracts or accessible via external online hosts.

3.3 Inter-office cooperation of the EPO in the field of classification

The EPO maintains regular contacts of cooperation and exchange with other patent offices and with WIPO in the field of classification.

3.3.1 IPC Revision

The EPO actively participates in the revision of the IPC. Examiners provide technical input to revision projects, whether in form of proposals or in form of comments on revision requests of other patent offices. A team of classification experts under the supervision of Principal Directorate Documentation transfers the internal contributions to WIPO as the organisation which manages the revision process. The budget invested in terms of examiner and PD Documentation time as well as travel expenses is estimated to be between 2 and 2.5 million DM for one revision period of five years.

3.3.2 Use of ECLA by other patent offices and other external users

Availability

It is the clear understanding of the patent information dissemination policy of the EPO, that the EPO classification and indexing schemes should be available to external users, be it member state offices, other patent offices or the general public.

The access to the schemes is provided in various ways. Member state offices have direct electronic access via the EPOQUE environment. Other offices and the general public can receive ECLA and ICO data on tapes in the framework of the EPO's EPIDOS product list. The ECLA and ICO data are also regularly delivered to public hosts such as Questel, which offers the data under the database name ECLATX.

The classification scheme ECLA is also available on paper. The complete edition is collected in ten volumes for the "IPC" part and two volumes for the IdT part, all in all containing more than 3,000 pages. Once a month, all updates are collected in printed amendment pages, the so-called monthly bulletins.

Cooperation in the ECLA and ICO revision

Since a few years the interest of patent offices in actively using ECLA for search and in participating in the ECLA revision process is growing. In the meantime, the patent offices of the United Kingdom and the USA use ECLA on an operational basis for search. The examiners of these offices have the possibility to participate in the ECLA revision by submitting comments and suggestions. Agreements to this effect have been made and a procedure for handling this participation has been implemented three years ago with the UKPO and one year ago with the USPTO. Further offices have announced their interest to use ECLA for their own search documentation and to participate in the ECLA revision process.

4. Does the EPO need the IPC?

As already mentioned, the IPC is in principle not used for search at the EPO, except for the JP and RU/SU abstract collections. However, the search impact of IPC used for these collections is limited. Inhomogeneous application of the symbols and differences in interpretation of the IPC and its rules by different offices make it necessary to be cautious when applying IPC for limiting search results. Therefore in practice, IPC is used for the purpose of search only on a rather high classification level, for example subclass or main group, in order to make a first limitation.

A further complication of the use of IPC is caused by the particular structure of a documentation classified according to IPC. Documents are once classified for publication and never reclassified. When a new IPC edition comes into force, a related batch of documentation is created. Depending on the modifications contained in the new edition of the IPC, technical features may be covered by classification entries different from the previous edition. Until today, six five-year batches have been created, beginning in 1968. When searching with the IPC, each of these batches has to be searched independently by making use of the related IPC version. On top of that, documents published before 1968 cannot be searched easily using the IPC. For searches in electronic databases, this aspect is becoming more important in view of the active policy of patent database producers to include documents before 1968.

The use of IPC for document distribution with regard to ECLA classification might be replaced in the future by the use of automatic text analysing tools. However, for this "preclassification" these tools need to be further developed in order to lead to sufficiently high levels of preclassification quality. Next to that, all documents will have to be available in character coded form in an early stage after publication.

5. Should the IPC be revised?

From the considerations mentioned above, it is evident that the direct impact of the IPC and that of the EPO investment into the revision process on the internal search and documentation related activities of the EPO is limited. On the other hand, the EPO concedes the continuing need for an international patent classification tool, in particular for those offices and their national collections which do not belong to the PCT minimum documentation. Classification-based searches in these collections can only be carried out if these offices classify their own documents, even if for PCT documentation searches they would use other systems available to them.

It is the opinion of the EPO, that the different needs of offices concerning classification schemes and classified document collections as well as their willingness and capacity to invest into the maintenance of the IPC system will make it necessary to achieve a new compromise about the revision process. The EPO would like to invite offices to consider a partly "frozen" IPC system as a possibility to balance needs and costs. In other words, the EPO proposes not to revise the IPC any further except for new technology like recently done for the micro-mechanical technology (new IPC 7 classes B81 and B82). To the EPO, the status of the current elaboration of the IPC would be sufficient as a classification tool to provide a basic structure for the published new patent documentation throughout the world.

Further activity in the revision of the IPC should instead be directed towards making the system more user-friendly and to adapt it to new needs after transition from paper-based to electronic search documentations. The following aspects would need particular attention:

- revision of the rules of the system, like obligatory versus non-obligatory classification/indexing, "double oblique stroke" presentation, multiple classification, necessity of last-place rules or precedence notes, linked indexing
- availability and formats of IPC symbols in databases
- improvement of the wording of groups in many areas of the IPC and its adaptation to modern technical language
- creation of a second layer of information, like definitions, examples

The validity period of the seventh edition could be used to assess the practicability of such a partly "frozen" system and to concentrate on the discussion of the items mentioned above.

6. The IPC Revision Procedure

In its seminar invitation circular, the International Bureau invited proposals on the IPC revision procedure. Therefore, independently of the considerations about the future of the IPC given above, the EPO has made an attempt to define a leaner structure and more streamlined procedure for the IPC revision, in order to enhance the process of the revision in terms of quality and quantity.

6.1 The IPC Committee of Experts (IPC/CE)

The IPC/CE is the decision making body in all questions relating to the IPC. In our opinion, the meetings of the IPC/CE should concentrate on the questions of political, management or other general nature. Examples of typical topics or IPC/CE meetings are: the future of the IPC, obligatory versus non obligatory indexing, multiple classification, the Guide to the IPC etc.

The IPC/CE installs three technical working groups according to the three different main areas of technology: Mechanical field (IPC/CE/M), chemistry (IPC/CE/C) and electricity/physics (IPC/CE/E). The IPC/CE plans the workload of these working groups by choosing appropriate revision projects from the list of revision requests submitted to the IPC/CE by patent offices. Details of the rules of procedure are explained below.

The IPC/CE delegates a full mandate to the working groups to discuss and decide about the IPC revision projects without the need for the IPC/CE to re-examine or to finally adopt the results. In other words, the working groups are entitled to develop the IPC in the framework of the assigned projects independently.

The IPC/CE installs a conciliation board (IPC/CE/CB) for handling complaints, mistakes or other matter reported by offices in relation to projects completed by the working groups. Details of the composition and working methods of the conciliation board are explained below.

6.2 The revision working groups (IPC/CE/M, IPC/CE/C and IPC/CE/E)

The revision working groups deal only with technical revision projects. All other questions are handled directly by the IPC/CE. The working groups have the mandate to decide independently about the projects assigned to them.

The working groups usually meet twice a year for one week, provided sufficient workload is assigned to them by the IPC/CE. Every working group can decide to cancel one of its meetings, e.g. because of insufficient workload. The International Bureau takes the necessary steps to allow seven daily meeting hours for the working group meetings.

The International Bureau undertakes all possible measures to enhance the technical support during the meetings. In particular, the possibility to display technical results of the discussions on-line or near-line in the meeting room should be foreseen. With the assistance of such a display facility the International Bureau and the delegations would be enabled to work, for example, for three and a half days for project discussions and to finalise a report during the remaining 1.5 days of the session week.

The definition of the working group procedure must allow to discuss all projects informally in one language only. It can be expected, that this approach leads to a higher output per meeting and a considerable saving of interpretation costs for the International Bureau.

For each project the IPC/CE assigns one of the working group's member offices as translator office and one member as translation rapporteur. The French version of the interim results achieved in the English language is prepared by the translator office, taking into account the limit dates set by the working groups. The translation rapporteur collects all translations and the comments received by offices on the translation drafts. Upon completion of a project in the English language, the complete version of the project in French is presented to the working groups for formal adoption.

If suitable for an improved discussion, the working groups should group together projects of similar nature or in related areas of the IPC and treat them together. If necessary for such a thematic bundle of projects, meetings could be organised at patent offices with the possibility to consult the local patent documentation or to hear experts directly in the working groups. The details of the information exchange and the rules of procedure are explained below.

6.3 Rules of Procedure and Communication Methods

Revision requests can be submitted to the IPC/CE only. The IPC/CE decides whether or not to put these requests on the program of the working groups, if necessary after modification of the extent of the projects, for example by limiting them to a narrower area of the IPC or by grouping two or more requests into one project.

The IPC/CE sets first dates for comments and rapporteur reports. All further limit dates during the lifetime of projects are set by the working groups.

Offices and delegations at meetings must always and strictly consider whether or not additional points of interest brought up by offices but not present in requests accepted by the IPC/CE, are in such a close relation to the subject of a project, that successful completion is only possible by inclusion of these points in the discussion. This rule must be applied very strictly. It has to be pointed out that the patent offices can submit requests at all times, and could use this possibility to put forward the additional points mentioned.

In order to ensure efficiency of the procedure, limit dates must be respected strictly. In particular, neither the rapporteurs nor the working groups in their meetings should take onboard any modifications proposed in comments or counterproposals if submitted too late in relation to the limit dates.

Rapporteurs should undertake all possible steps, to facilitate the discussion at the meetings. In particular, they should follow strictly the rapporteur guidelines (see WIPO Handbook). It should be mandatory for the rapporteurs to draw up a detailed proposal together with every rapporteur report, so that discussions of the working group can always be based on a comprehensive working paper. In order to speed up the discussion of difficult and undecided matter, rapporteurs should get the procedural possibility to trigger a second round of comments on the basis of their report, or to contact offices to solve specific problems, for example to cite examples or to give some indication about file size and growth.

6.4 The Conciliation Board (IPC/CE/CB)

The IPC/CE nominates a group of three experts, one from each different technical area, for example for a period of two years, to form a conciliation board (IPC/CE/CB). This group deals with all types of communications of patent offices with the IPC/CE in relation to projects already completed by the working groups, for example complaints, reported mistakes etc. In an independent consultation and discussion procedure, which usually is carried out in written form only, the conciliation board tries to establish an opinion about the cases on the basis of a majority vote. The decisions of the conciliation board are forwarded to the IPC/CE, for further action if necessary. Cases which cannot be solved by the conciliation board, have to be decided by the IPC/CE.

7. Conclusion

The EPO continues to believe that classification of patent documents is a "conditio sine qua non" for the use of the search documentation in an efficient way in terms of search quality and quantity. Therefore, the EPO continues to further develop its own classification system ECLA which is continuously revised and adapted to the changes in the different technological fields. The search documentation classified according to ECLA is maintained dynamically, which means that in combination with revisions of the ECLA scheme the backfile of the search documentation is reclassified. An indexing system called ICO is used to identify additional information in documents. Both the ECLA and the ICO system are also used by national patent offices and other users.

In the EPO, the IPC use is limited to the JP and RU/SU abstract collections for search purposes and to administrative purposes in the handling of incoming new patent documents. The EPO foresees growing difficulties in the use of the IPC as a worldwide patent search tool, if the current approach of creating editions and related batches of documentation continues to be applied. Therefore, the EPO proposes to partly "freeze" the IPC and to limit revision to the introduction of entries for completely new technology. Further activity in the revision of the IPC system should instead be directed towards making the system more user-friendly and adapted to electronic searching.

For the procedure of the IPC revision activity, the EPO proposes a more stream-lined and more flexible approach which allows quick adaptation of activities to the revision needs.

[End of document]