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D E C I S I O N
of 15 November 2005

Case Number: T 0512/03 - 3.5.02

Application Number: 96923173.7

Publication Number: 0958549

IPC: G07B 5/04

Language of the proceedings: EN

Title of invention:
Method and device for turn number systems

Applicant:
Abbela elektronik AB

Opponent:
-

Headword:
-

Relevant legal provisions:
EPC Art. 54

Keyword:
"Novelty (no)"

Decisions cited:
-

Catchword:
-

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Beschwerdekammern | Boards of Appeal | Chambres de recours

Case Number: T 0512/03 - 3.5.02

D E C I S I O N
of the Technical Board of Appeal 3.5.02
of 15 November 2005

Appellant: (Applicant)
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Decision under appeal:
Decision of the Examining Division of the European Patent Office posted 6 December 2002 refusing European application No. 96923173.7 pursuant to Article 97(1) EPC.

Composition of the Board:

Chairman: W. Wheeler
Members: M. Ruggiu
P. Mühlens

Summary of Facts and Submissions

I. The applicant filed an appeal against the decision of the examining division to refuse European patent application No. 96923173.7.

II. The decision under appeal cited in particular the following prior art document:

D2: US-A-5 006 983.

III. A communication from the board that accompanied summons to oral proceedings indicated that the subject-matter of claims 1 and 6 of the application under appeal seemed to lack novelty with respect to the prior art disclosed in D2. In reply, with a letter dated 14 October 2005, the appellant filed two sets of amended claims, according to a main and an auxiliary request. The oral proceedings before the board were held on 15 November 2005. The appellant requested that the decision under appeal be set aside and that a patent be granted on the basis of claims 1 to 9 of the main request or on the basis of claims 1 to 9 of the auxiliary request, both filed with the letter dated 14 October 2005.

IV. The independent claims 1 and 6 of the main request read as follows:

1. "Method for a queue number system for serving customers at least at one service position, by which method customers given a queue number via a selection unit, the dispensed queue numbers being registered and the customers being summoned via an information unit to

be served, preferably in queue number order, wherein a customer, whom one wishes to identify and/or give priority to within the queue number system, is provided with an individual code, which is supplied by the customer to a central unit (4) comprised in the queue number system when the customer is given a queue number, whereupon the customers, based upon said code, to a desired extent is identified and/or given priority as regards queue numbers, characterized in that individual information for the customer including said code is pre-stored in a customer data unit (10), and is transferred to a desired extent to the service position (1), to which the customer is directed."

6. "Device for a queue number system for serving customers at least at one service position, comprising a selection unit, via which customers are given a queue number, and further comprising means for registering dispensed queue numbers and for summoning customers via an information unit to be served, preferably in queue number order, wherein a central unit (4) is adapted to be supplied with an individual code when a customer, whom one desires to identify and/or give priority to within the queue number system, is allotted a queue number and to the desired extent, identify the customer and/or give priority to the customer as regards queue number, characterized by a customer data unit (10) arranged for pre-storage of individual information for a customer, including said code, means (4, 10) being provided for transferring said individual information to a desired extent to the service position, to which the customer is directed."

Claims 2 to 5 of the main request are dependent on claim 1, and claims 7 to 9 on claim 6.

V. The pre-characterising portions of independent claims 1 and 6 of the auxiliary request are identical to the pre-characterising portions of claims 1 and 6 of the main request, respectively.

The characterising portion of claim 1 of the auxiliary request is as follows:
"characterized in that individual information for the customer including said code is stored in a customer data unit (10) before the customer is given a queue number, and is transferred to a desired extent to the service position (1), to which the customer is directed."

The characterising portion of claim 6 of the auxiliary request is as follows:
"characterized by a customer data unit (10) arranged for storage before the customer is given a queue number, of individual information for a customer, including said code, means (4, 10) being provided for transferring said individual information to a desired extent to the service position, to which the customer is directed."

Claims 2 to 5 of the auxiliary request are dependent on claim 1, and claims 7 to 9 on claim 6.

VI. The appellant essentially argued as follows:

D2 had to be regarded as the prior art closest to the invention because it had more features in common with

the invention than the other document cited in the decision under appeal. According to D2, the name of a customer entering a travel agency was supplied as a code to a central unit, a queue number was given to the customer, and the customer was summoned later. The invention added a preliminary step to this procedure, which preliminary step comprised pre-storing individual information for the customer. Furthermore, according to the invention, the pre-stored individual information was transferred to a service position. In the queuing system of D2, all information entered in a customer database was provided at or after the time the customer requested a service, and was entered by a receptionist at the arrival of the customer at the service provider (travel agency). This was apparent from the fact that information entered in the customer database of D2 included in particular the required service level (column 7, lines 17 to 19 of D2). Contrary to D2, the customer data unit of the invention stored valuable information about the customer at all times. D2 did not disclose that individual information for the customer including the individual code was pre-stored in a customer data unit and was transferred to a desired extent to the service position, to which the customer was directed. The problem solved by pre-storage and transferral of individual information was to simplify procedures when serving customers at a queue number system. The description of the present application (page 3, lines 11 to 18) gave examples of pre-stored individual information for a customer as being a bank account, a bank balance, a picture of the customer, a signature of the customer, personal data, the individual code and the priority status of the customer. Such information was typically stored in a database all

the time, i.e. regardless of whether the customer wanted service or not. The invention made it possible to combine pre-stored information about the customer with queue information, so that the pre-stored information was available at the service position when the customer was to be served. The pre-stored individual information was provided automatically at the service position, without necessity for the customer to identify himself at the service position. Furthermore, the invention differed from D2 in that the customer data unit was separate from the queue number system. In particular, the second paragraph of page 3 of the description of the application indicated that the customer data unit was coupled to the queue number system. D2 gave no hint in the direction of the invention because D2 was mainly concerned with services at a travel agency, where there was no obvious need for pre-storing information. The invention was actually used in a hospital in Spain. The patients were provided with cards carrying individual codes. A patient wanting to consult a physician provided his card to obtain a queue number. The code of the card further permitted transfer of a pre-stored medical file of the patient automatically to the physician at the time of the consultation. This provided a high level of efficiency and security.

Reasons for the Decision

1. The appeal is admissible.

2. Document D2 discloses a method and a device for a queue number system, for serving customers at least at one

service position (the desk of an agent in a travel agency). When a customer enters the travel agency, he is directed to a reception desk where a receptionist enters certain information, which in particular includes the name of the customer, into a workstation 6 and issues a pager 8 to the customer. The receptionist also identifies the appropriate service level for the customer, i.e. he classifies the priority status of the customer. In addition to three different priority levels, there is a fourth level of classification referred to as "not queued", which is for a customer who wants service but does not wish to be waiting "in line" because he wants first to complete another transaction elsewhere (see in particular column 7, lines 17 to 28 of D2). The workstation 6 is part of a computer device 2 including a program that enters the customer's data into a customer database 32 stored in a file server 20 and determines the customer's assigned position in queue. The customers who are waiting to be paged are organized in customer database 32 into a set of queues 102 shown in FIG 7 of D2. The device 2 manages the queues and summons the customers to be served, preferably in queue number order, by means of the pagers 8. After a customer arrives at the agent's desk in response to being paged, the agent collects the customer's pager 8 and enters the pager's unique identifier at his workstation 10. If the entered pager number is correct, the device 2 informs the agent of this and displays the customer's name (assuming the customer's name had previously been entered) (see in particular column 9, lines 39 to 48 of D2). When a customer having the "not queued" status notifies the receptionist that he has completed the other transaction, he is put into a queue by the receptionist

(see in particular column 15, lines 46 to 64 of D2). This requires the receptionist to enter the code of the pager or alternatively the name of the customer in a "view pager status" form 60 displayed at workstation 6 (see in particular column 8, lines 10 to 39 of D2).

3. The receptionist's work station of D2 operates as a selection unit via which customers are given queue numbers. Furthermore, the device of D2 comprises means for registering dispensed queue numbers, since it is able to assign a customer to one of a number of queues. Each of the pagers of D2 constitutes an information unit for summoning the customer to be served. The file server of D2, which stores the customer database, can be regarded as functionally including a central unit adapted to be supplied with an individual code identifying the customer (the name of a customer) when a customer, whom one desires to identify and give priority within the queue number system, is allotted a queue number. In the case of a "not queued" customer, the name of the customer is stored in the device of D2 before the customer is assigned to one of the queues, in other words is pre-stored in the device of D2. The device of D2 also transfers individual information, including the name of the customer, to the agent's desk, i.e. the service position to which the customer is directed. The independent claims of both the main and the auxiliary requests do not exclude the possibility that the central unit and the customer data unit share common hardware. Since customers having the "not queued" status are not included in any of the queues provided in D2, it is apparent that the information relative to "not queued" customers is not stored in the same functional unit as the information relative to the

queued customers. Thus, that part of the device of D2 that stores the individual information of "not queued" customers can be regarded as functionally forming a customer data unit. Furthermore, the independent claims do not exclude the possibility that some operation is needed at the service position to transfer the individual information. Also, the independent claims do not require that information going beyond the individual code of the customer, which in D2 is the customer's name, be transferred to the service position.

The board concludes therefore that the subject-matter of independent claims 1 and 6, of both the main and the auxiliary requests of the appellant, are part of the state of the art disclosed in D2. Thus, the invention cannot be considered to be new in the sense of Article 54(1) EPC.

Order

For these reasons it is decided that:

The appeal is dismissed.

The Registrar: The Chairman:

U. Bultmann W. J. L. Wheeler