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Datasheet for the decision
of 21 March 2012

Case Number: T 1769/07 - 3.5.01

Application Number: 97902983.2

Publication Number: 876651

IPC: G06F17/60

Language of the proceedings: EN

Title of invention:
AUTOMATED TRAVEL SERVICE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEM

Applicant:
HEWLETT-PACKARD DEVELOPMENT COMPANY, L.P.

Headword:
Travel management/HEWLETT-PACKARD

Relevant legal provisions:
EPC 1973 Art. 56

Keyword:
Inventive step - storing travel data in single format (no -
obvious design consideration)

Decisions cited:

Catchword:

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Beschwerdekammern   Boards of Appeal   Chambres de recours

Case Number: **T1769/07 - 3.5.01**

D E C I S I O N
of the Technical Board of Appeal 3.5.01
of 21 March 2012

Appellant: (Applicant)	HEWLETT-PACKARD DEVELOPMENT COMPANY, L.P. 11445 Compaq Center Drive West Houston, TX 77070 (US)
Representative:	Zimmermann, Tankred Klaus Schoppe, Zimmermann, Stöckeler & Zinkler Patentanwälte Postfach 246 82043 Pullach bei München (DE)
Decision under appeal:	**Decision of the Examining Division of the European Patent Office posted 12 April 2007 refusing European patent application No. 97902983.2 pursuant to Article 97(1) EPC 1973.**

Composition of the Board:

Chairman: S. Wibergh
Members: W. Chandler
             A. Pignatelli

Summary of Facts and Submissions

I.   This appeal, filed with letter received on 11 June 2007
        with fee paid on the same day, is against the decision
        of the examining division to refuse the European patent
        application No. 97902983.2. It concerns a method of
        automated support for the functions of a travel agent.

II.   The examining division stated that it was known to
        store inventory (e.g. travel) information in a database
        and retrieve it upon request from a customer. They
        considered that the features that distinguished
        claim 1, namely integrating the commands to, and the
        information from, different reservation systems into a
        single format, solved the problem of how to integrate
        the information from a plurality of systems. They
        decided that the solution was obvious from the terminal
        system of D7 (GB-A-1565286)(Article 56 EPC 1973). The
        division also added that D6 (WO-A-93/10502) showed the
        (unclaimed) idea of retrieving information from a
        plurality of airline reservation systems and generating
        an itinerary based on user profiles.

III.   In the statement setting out the grounds of appeal,
        filed with letter received on 10 August 2007, the
        appellant requested that the decision under appeal be
        set aside and that a patent be granted on the basis of
        the refused request. The appellant also requested oral
        proceedings.

IV.   In the communication accompanying the summons to oral
        proceedings, the Board summarised the issues to be
        discussed and tended to consider that the claimed
        subject-matter did not involve an inventive step over
        D6 and the skilled person's common general knowledge.

V.   In a reply, dated 21 February 2012, the appellant filed
        a new main and first and second auxiliary request,
        claim 1 having, respectively, minor amendments, an
        additional feature relating to making the data
        simultaneously available, and the feature relating to
        the common command format deleted. It was stated that
        neither the applicant nor the representative would be
        attending the oral proceedings.

VI.   At the oral proceedings, which took place in the
        appellant's absence, the Board considered the above-
        mentioned appellant's requests. At the end of the
        proceedings, the Chairman announced the Board's
        decision.

VII.   Claim 1 of the main request reads as follows:

        "A method of providing decisional support for travel
        services, comprising the steps of:
            generating (1004) a business entity profile (18);
            generating (1006) an individual profile (20);
            automatically accessing (1010) plural computer
        reservation systems (14) to obtain inventory
        information;
            integrating (1013) the inventory information
        received from the plural computer reservation systems
        (14) so that the inventory information is accessible by
        a single format;
            integrating command structures for the plural
        computer reservation systems (14) into a common command
        format so that only a single command is needed for
        accessing the plural computer reservation systems (14);
            storing the business entity profile (18), the
        individual profile (20), and the integrated inventory
        information in a database (24);

receiving (1008) a travel request from a customer (16); and
automatically accessing the database (24), including the integrated inventory information therein, in response to the reception of the travel request."

In claim 1 of the first auxiliary request the end of the fourth feature specifies the additional result:

"and so that business entity information from the business entity profile (18), individual information from the individual profile (20) and the inventory information from the plural computer reservation systems (14) are simultaneously accessible by a travel agent;"

and the end of the last feature specifies:

"wherein accessing the database (24) causes the business entity information, the individual information and the inventory information from the plural computer reservation systems (14) to be accessed simultaneously by the travel agent."

Claim 1 of the second auxiliary request removes from claim 1 of the first auxiliary request the fifth feature, relating to integrating command structures.

VIII.   The appellant has argued essentially as follows:

Document D7 failed to show automatically accessing plural computer reservation systems to obtain inventory information and storing this information in a database that was accessible in a single format.

D6 did not disclose integrating the command structures
for the plural computer reservation systems into a
common command format. D6 also required repeated access
to each reservation system, which was counter to the
purpose of the invention, namely to provide a central
database with integrated inventory information.

D6 referred to a "specific airline flight" on page 11.
Thus it did not disclose accessing plural computer
reservation systems as claimed.

D6 did not disclose integrating the inventory
information received from the plural airlines into a
standardised format and storing it in the database so
that it was accessible simultaneously by the travel
agent.

Reasons for the Decision

1.   The appeal complies with the requirements referred to
        in Rule 65(1) EPC 1973 and is therefore admissible.

        The application

2.   The opening part of the description of the invention
        explains that in order to draw up a customer's travel
        plan, a travel agent has to access various proprietary
        computer reservation systems (CRS), e.g. different
        airline systems, car rental, hotel systems etc. Also,
        different customers' plans for work-related travel may
        be linked by common employer-imposed requirements, such
        as restriction to tourist class flights, use of
        particular negotiated hotel or car rental rates.

3.   The invention (see page 4) is essentially a method that
        integrates and manages the information from the various
        reservation systems, the employers (businesses) and the
        customers into a single database and system.

        The *requests*

4.   In the present case, claim 1 of the first auxiliary
        request limits that of the main request by specifying
        the further effect of integrating the inventory
        information received from the reservation systems into
        a single format. Unusually, this claim is also more
        limited than that of the second auxiliary request,
        which has the feature of integrating the command
        structures deleted. Thus claim 1 of the first auxiliary
        request is the most limited claim and the Board prefers
        to consider this claim first.

        First auxiliary request

5.   It is common ground that D6 is a suitable starting
        point. D6 concerns the problem of improving the
        efficiency of a travel reservation system, in
        particular for business customers (D6, page 3, lines 21
        to 24), as does the present invention (cf. published
        application, page 2, lines 17 to 26).

6.   Using the terms of claim 1, it is also common ground
        that D6 discloses:
          a business entity profile (page 9, lines 1 to 17 and
        Figure 1: 18 - "travel policy file", which contains
        details of group discounts etc.)
          an individual profile (page 5, lines 17 to 26 -
        "group member data file")

storing the business entity profile and the
individual profile in a database (page 8, lines 6 to 7
and page 9, lines 28 to 29) and

receiving a travel request from a customer (page 12,
lines 9 to 11, Figure 3 and claim 1, lines 1 to 3).

7.   The appellant argues that D6 does not disclose the
        feature of "automatically accessing plural computer
        reservation systems to obtain inventory information".
        In particular, page 11, line 7 mentions "specific
        airline flights", which allegedly implies that only a
        single CRS *needs* to be interrogated. However, in the
        Board's judgement D6 discloses the possibility of using
        more than one. The passage on page 9, lines 12 to 13
        states that the travel policy will include one or *more*
        preselected airline carriers. The process for selecting
        a flight shown in Figure 2A and described at page 13,
        lines 12 to 22 then shows interrogating (these)
        airlines until a flight is found. Finally, claim 4,
        lines 7 to 10 defines this process as interrogating
        "said plurality of airline computerized reservation
        systems". Moreover, the Board notes that, since claim 1
        does not specify the type of CRS, even the sequence of
        actions of accessing a CRS for a flight, then a hotel
        and finally a car in Figure 2 of D6 falls under the
        claimed accessing plural CRSs.

8.   The Board also considers that D6 implies the feature of
        "integrating command structures for the plural computer
        reservation systems into a common command format so
        that only a single command is needed for accessing
        [them]". This feature was added during examination and
        the only support for it appears to be the passage
        bridging pages 6 and 7 of the description cited by the
        applicant. It appears from this passage that the
        "single command" relates to a command given by a user

to the claimed system rather than the a command from
the claimed system to the airline system, the latter
not necessarily being common between different
airlines. However, in D6, which interrogates different
reservation systems using a standard user interface,
the individual member's travel request (claim 1, end of
page 17) would in the Board's view be in a "common
command format" by definition.

9.   The appellant argues, that D6 does not allow the use of
        a single command. However, the argument appears to be
        assuming that the common commands relate to those sent
        to the reservation system, whereas as explained above,
        in the Board's view, these commands are generally not
        common since they relate to different systems.
        Similarly, the appellant argues that D6 requires
        separate access to each reservation system, implying
        that this is not the case in the invention. However,
        the Board understands that the invention avoids the
        user having to do this, but that the system itself must
        still do it.

10.   Thus in the Board's view, the method of claim 1 differs
        from that of D6 in that the inventory information
        received from the reservation systems is stored in the
        database and is accessible by a "single format" and by
        the newly added feature that this information and the
        other information in the database are "simultaneously
        accessible" by a travel agent. The description
        mentions, at page 4, penultimate paragraph, that the
        invention has the technical advantage that the data is
        "readily available" and this seems to be the effect of
        these features. Thus the problem could be considered as
        how to improve the access to the travel data.

11.   However, the Board judges that storing retrieved data
        locally in the database is an obvious possibility that
        the skilled person would consider depending on the
        circumstances, e.g. whether the user might want to see
        the data again. Such data would by definition be
        accessible by a "single format", which would be the
        standardised commands used to access the database, or
        possibly the output before translation from the
        standard user interface. All the data, being stored in
        the same database, would, by definition, also be
        "simultaneously accessible" as claimed.

12.   Accordingly, claim 1 of the first auxiliary request
        lacks an inventive step (Article 56 EPC 1973). Since
        claim 1 of the main and second auxiliary requests are
        broader (see point 4, above), none of the requests are
        allowable, so that the appeal must be dismissed.

Order

For these reasons it is decided that:

        The appeal is dismissed.

The Registrar: The Chairman:

T. Buschek   S. Wibergh

Decision electronically authenticated