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**Datasheet for the decision
of 2 October 2013**

Case Number: T 1415/11 - 3.5.01

Application Number: 03700184.9

Publication Number: 1472633

IPC: G06F 17/60

Language of the proceedings: EN

Title of invention:

Enhanced Email Management System

Applicant:

SAP AG

Headword:

Displaying context information/SAP

Relevant legal provisions (EPC 1973):

EPC Art. 56

Keyword:

"Inventive step - (no) "

Decisions cited:

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Catchword:

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Case Number: T 1415/11 - 3.5.01

D E C I S I O N
of the Technical Board of Appeal 3.5.01
of 2 October 2013

Appellant:
(Applicant)

SAP AG
Dietmar-Hopp-Allee 16
69190 Walldorf (DE)

Representative:

Müller-Boré & Partner
Patentanwälte
Grafinger Straße 2
81671 München (DE)

Decision under appeal:

**Decision of the Examining Division of the
European Patent Office posted 11 February 2011
refusing European patent application
No. 03700184.9 pursuant to Article 97(2) EPC.**

Composition of the Board:

Chairman: W. Chandler
Members: R. R. K. Zimmermann
P. Schmitz

Summary of Facts and Submissions

- I. Euro-PCT-application 03700184.9 published as international application WO 03/058519 (A-document) claims priority of earlier filings in 2002 for an email document management system capable of displaying context information related to a selected email document, its sender, recipients or subject matter.
- II. The examining division refused the application in oral proceedings; the written notification of the decision was issued on 11 February 2011. According to the decision, the invention did not involve an inventive step starting from a notorious general purpose email system, as exemplified e.g. by document D1, the international publication WO 99/04344, published in 1999.
- III. The appellant (applicant) filed a notice of appeal against the decision of the examining division as well as a statement setting out the grounds of appeal on 11 April 2011. The appeal fee was paid on the same day.

By a letter dated 8 August 2013, the appellant filed a main set and an auxiliary set of amended claims as new main and auxiliary requests in preparation of oral proceedings summoned on the appellant's request.

- IV. Claim 1 of the main request reads as follows (brackets <> added for ease of reference):

"A computer-implemented method for managing electronic messages, the method comprising:

receiving an email (100) from a sender, the email (100) including an identifier (652) and content in a body (656);
displaying the identifier (652) in a first portion of a display;
displaying the body (656) in a second portion of the display; and characterized by
upon receipt of the email (100), retrieving context information (104) associated with the email (100), the context information (104) comprising a recent sent email list (106) to the sender retrieved by parsing a sent mail folder belonging to the sender, wherein the recent sent email list (106) includes similar emails (100) as the current email (100) being identified by searching the contents of said emails (100) <>;
wherein the context information (104) is displayed in a third portion of the display."

Claim 1 of the auxiliary request has the same wording as claim 1 above, except for the following text inserted at position <> (see above):

"and the context information (104) comprising at least one suggested operation (305) to perform on the email (100) determined by comparing the email (100) to a log file (216) that contains information regarding past operations performed on the similar emails (100), the log file (216) indicating that a particular operation has been performed on a certain number of the similar emails (100) "

- V. Oral proceedings took place before the Board on 2 October 2013. The Board admitted both requests filed on 8 August 2013 and discussed the matter under appeal with the appellant. The Board finally closed the oral proceedings with the announcement of the decision.
- VI. The appellant requested that the decision under appeal be set aside and that a patent be granted on the basis of the main or auxiliary request filed with letter dated 8 August 2013.
- VII. It was undisputed that document D1 was relevant to the invention. The appellant argued that the invention provided a technical contribution over the prior art which was non-obvious. The invention was said to offer a convenient way of providing a user with context information related to a received message. The informational content so provided might arguably be similar to that provided by the system of document D1; however, the appellant stressed that the technical implementation of the means to retrieve the information was different from those proposed in document D1. In the prior art every incoming email had to be parsed, processed and stored in advance before displaying any context information was possible.

The present invention retrieved a recent sent email list on the fly, eliminating the overhead of premature processing and storing of emails in folders under various categories. The required context information was retrieved by searching the content of a subset of emails only, namely emails similar to the current email. As defined in claim 1, the similar emails were included in "a recent sent email list (106) to the

sender retrieved by parsing a sent mail folder belonging to the sender". Searching in such a subset of emails saved processing time and memory resources, and so improved the man-machine interaction, all technical advantages that were not achieved by the prior art.

The subject matter of the auxiliary request was just a further embodiment, which exploited the insight that the log file could be used to retrieve, automatically and efficiently, context information about past operations. Again, the technical advantages achieved were savings in processing time and memory resources.

Reasons for the Decision

1. The appeal, although admissible, is not allowable since both requests before the Board relate to subject matter that does not meet the requirement of inventive step as set out in Articles 52 (1) EPC and 56 EPC 1973.

Main request

2. It is undisputed, that prior art document D1 discloses a computer implemented method for managing electronic messages (see e.g. D1, abstract), i.e. emails including an identifier (header including sender's email address, topic etc.) and content in a body (see D1, e.g. page 15, lines 11 to 14 in connection with page 3, lines 18 to 25). The identifier is displayed in a first portion of a display (see D1, figure 5, table 500) and the body is displayed in a second portion of the display (see D1, figure 6(a)).

3. As can be inferred from the submissions made during the oral proceedings, the appellant also does not dispute that in document D1 context information (contacts, past correspondences etc.) is displayed in a third portion of the display (see D1, e.g. figures 6(a) and 7, description, e.g. page 23, lines 4 to 24).

4. The Board finds that document D1 further discloses the generation of a list of emails recently sent to/received from a particular sender as can be seen from figures 5 and 6(a). The emails included in such a list can be understood as "similar" in the sense that all emails in the list have in common that the topic content and/or the correspondent are the same or similar in all emails in the list.

An example for a display of the context information in relation to a particular correspondent is given in figures 6(a) and (b) of D1 (all recent emails from the sender Paul Smythe to the user Steve Miller are displayed). The possible options for retrieving context information may be inferred from figures 11B and 11D in connection with figures 9F and 9G, which show the data structure of a request for retrieving context information in relation to a correspondent (figure 11B) and in relation to a topic of content (figure 11D).

5. The invention and the prior art of document D1 differ in the manner of storing and retrieving information. In the prior art, messages are converted in advance into a common message object and into related data tables organised according to an entity-relationship scheme (see figures cited above), which allows the system to handle logic decisions "in a fraction of the time"

required to re-scan a message for retrieving information (see D1, e.g. the paragraph starting at page 24, line 25).

6. According to the invention, an email is stored and processed in a format comprising a header and a body (see the claim's wording and figure 6 of the A-document). It is stored in folders (sent mail folder, inbox) provided on the client or on a server (see A-document, 212, 218 in Figure 2 and e.g. paragraphs 0018, 0032, 0033 or 0037). This data and storage structure closely corresponds to what is described in document D1 as "standard format" and "outdated flat-file database technology" (see D1, pages 3 to 11, and in particular page 3, line 15 ff. and page 7, line 18 ff.).

7. Despite the fact that the invention is based on a standard format and organisation of data less sophisticated than the entity-relationship approach proposed by document D1, the Board judges that retrieving context information in a "standard flat-file" system by parsing a subset of emails like the "sent mail folder belonging to the sender" on the fly is obvious in the light of the information given in document D1. Indeed, retrieving information by parsing any specific email folder does not interact with the email client or server in a manner to produce a technical effect or to contribute to any technical solution of the alleged technical problem of limited computer resources; at best, it bypasses such a problem by applying an administrative non-technical rule.

8. Thus, the limitations in claim 1 to parsing of the sent mail folder as opposed to other or all email folders do not have any technical contribution. Even if this choice made a technical contribution, picking the said sent mail folder would for this reason be an arbitrary feature, which cannot have any positive implications for inventive step.

9. The Board concludes that the main request is not allowable for lack of inventive step.

Auxiliary request

10. The auxiliary request additionally claims suggesting at least one operation on the basis of the number of operations performed on similar emails in the past, whereby the information on past operations is retrieved from a log file (for the claim's precise wording, see above).

11. In document D1, the list of recent emails (see figure 5) is complemented by a table of "similar" emails (see figure 6(a) and (b)) indicating, among other things, a number of past operations (see e.g. the items identified by the topic "Stock Recommendation", recording 3 as the maximum number of past read/sent operations belonging to this topic). The context information displayed suggests an operation "send", namely replying to the email of Paul Smythe received on 4/7/97 9:35 am. Hence, the additional features of claim 1 are anticipated and, regardless of their technical character, do not provide an inventive contribution to the prior art. Accordingly, the auxiliary request is not allowable for lack of inventive step.

12. Given the lack of an allowable request, the appeal cannot succeed.

Order

For these reasons it is decided that:

The appeal is dismissed.

The Registrar:

The Chairman:

T. Buschek

W. Chandler