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:
Case Number: T1769/07 - 3.5.01

DECISION
of the Technical Board of Appeal 3.5.01
of 21 March 2012

Appellant: HEWLETT-PACKARD DEVELOPMENT COMPANY, L.P.
(Applicant)
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)


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