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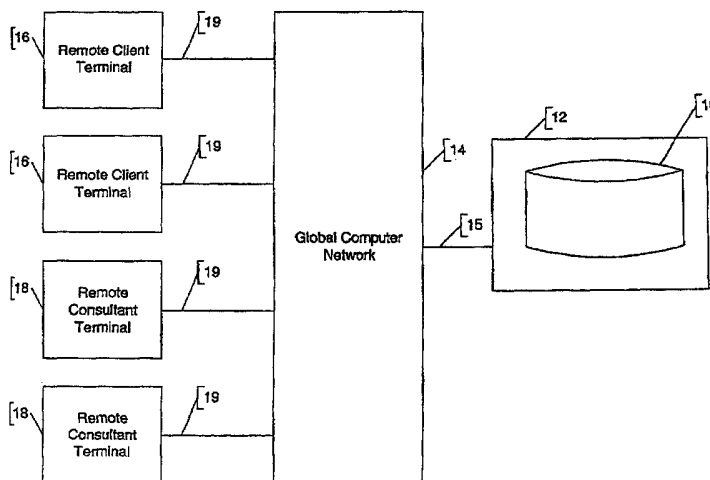
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(54) Title: REMOTE ONLINE CONSULTING SYSTEM



(57) **Abstract:** An online remote consulting system (10) for receiving and processing consulting requests from registered clients and client users (50). The system (10) allows for the registration of a client or an individual user who has one or more consulting requests regarding certain software applications and programs currently in use by the client. The system (10) receives the requests (85), and determines the business area concerned in each request (88), and assigns the requests to consultants registered with the system that have expertise in the indicated business area (90). The consultant then processes the request (110) and provides the client user with feedback (112) through the system (10) that includes any solution or recommendations for the request, along with any necessary documentation and/or background information (111). The consultant also completes an electronic timesheet (115) provided by the system (10) that is processed and forwarded by the system (10) to the client user upon completion of the request.



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REMOTE ONLINE CONSULTING SYSTEM

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a system and method of providing
5 consulting services for various computer programs and operating systems and more
specifically to a system and method of providing remote consulting services via a
global communication network.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

10 With the advent of computers, many different operating systems and other
computer programs have been developed in order to allow computers to be
effectively utilized in a variety of industries. These programs have been
specifically tailored to accommodate the unique problems and attributes of the
industries in which they are used.

15 When programs of this type are to be installed, they require experts to
perform the installation in order to insure that the program performs appropriately
and meets the requirements of the business processes in which they are used. As a
result, much of the time spent installing a program requires the presence of a
person, such as a consultant, who is highly knowledgeable about the program or
20 system and the business processes at issue. While the cost of having the consultant
present during the installation process is high, the consultant is able to immediately
assess and remedy any problems which may arise during the installation of the
program. This avoids complicating or dragging out the installation process if
problems do arise, because the consultant does not then have to travel to the
25 location where the program is being installed.

Furthermore, once a program of this type is up and running, many other
questions may arise regarding the operation of the program. These questions may
include questions regarding the capabilities of the program, such as whether the
program can be modified or expanded to accommodate a growing business, or

whether the system requirements can be shifted to accommodate changes in the business. Other questions may concern a problem encountered with the operation of the program or the compatibility of the program with another, separate program. In these situations, it is again necessary to contact a consultant who has extensive
5 knowledge regarding the program. In the situations where the questions concern problems with the program, or modifications that need to be made to the program, normally the consultant will travel to the location where the program is in use in order to address the problem. Similarly to the cost of having a consultant present when installing the program, the cost of having a consultant on site to remedy any
10 problem or modify the program is also very high. In some cases, this cost may even be prohibitively expensive depending on the severity of the problem that needs to be addressed.

Therefore, it is desirable to develop a system and method capable of providing the services and expertise of one or more consultants in order to install,
15 modify or remedy various problems with a computer program or system that does not require the consultant to be physically present where the computer program is or will be utilized. Such a system would greatly reduce the costs associated with obtaining a consultant to address a problem or question arising with respect to a computer program currently in use. This would, in turn, enable a much broader
20 range of individuals and business to purchase and use the programs due to the reduced costs associated with installing and maintaining the programs.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the present invention to provide a system connected to a
25 global computer network through which consulting services for computer programs can be obtained, and a method for using the system to greatly reduce and ultimately eliminate the need for and cost of an on-site consultant.

It is another object of the invention to provide a remote consulting services system and method that enables a user of a specific program to obtain a wide range

of consulting services and information concerning the program, including a solution to a problem with the program, or an answer to a question regarding the operation or capabilities of the program.

5 It is still another object of the invention to provide a remote consulting services system and method that enables an individual using the system to remove, add, or change certain issues or requests for information or consulting services in order to continuously update the specific consulting services needed, similarly to an on-site consulting environment.

10 It is still a further object of the invention to provide a remote consulting services system and method that offers a broad range of topical coverage for all aspects of the particular computer programs.

15 It is still another object of the invention to provide a remote consulting services system and method where the system provides immediate confirmation of any request submitted to the system and forwards the request to an appropriate consultant.

It is still a further object of the invention to provide a remote consulting services system and method capable of automatically assigning consulting requests submitted to the system to consultants with expertise in the subject matter of the request.

20 The present invention is a system connected to a global computer network that is capable of receiving and processing consulting requests and/or questions regarding computer programs from users registered with the system. The system confirms the submission of the requests and automatically assigns each of the requests to one of a number of individual consultants associated with the system
25 having expertise in the particular area addressed by the request.

Once the request is received and acknowledged by the consultant assigned by the system, the system facilitates remote communications between the registered user and the consultant, enabling the consultant to provide a solution or answer to the request made by the user through the system. The system enables this process

to take place completely via the global computer network to which the system is connected. The system thereby enables the users to obtain the necessary information regarding the particular request or question without the need for the consultant to be physically present on site with the user.

5 Various other features, objects and advantages of the invention will be made apparent from the following detailed description taken together with the drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

10 The drawings illustrate the best mode currently contemplated of carrying out the invention.

In the drawings:

Fig. 1 is a schematic view of the system of the present invention and a number of remote terminals connected to the system via a global computer
15 network;

Fig. 2 is a schematic diagram illustrating the organization and functions provided by the system of Fig. 1;

Fig. 3 is a flowchart illustrating the registration function of the system of
Fig. 2;

20 Fig. 4 is a flowchart illustrating the login function of the system of Fig. 2;

Fig. 5 is a flowchart illustrating the request submission and processing function of the system of Fig. 2;

Fig. 6 is a flowchart illustrating the client administration function of the system of Fig. 2;

25 Fig. 7 is a flowchart illustrating the system administration function of the system of Fig. 2;

Fig. 8 is a flowchart illustrating the help function of the system of Fig. 2;
and

Fig. 9 is a flowchart illustrating the user profile administration function of the system of Fig. 2.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

5 With reference now to the drawing figures in which like reference numerals designate like parts throughout the disclosure, the system of the present invention is illustrated in Fig. 1 generally at 10. The system 10 is contained on or loaded onto a computer server 12 that is connected to a global computer network 14. The server 12 can be any commercially available server having sufficient processing capability and
10 memory to store all of the required components of the system 10. Suitable servers 12 include _____ (model number), manufactured by _____ (manufacturer name) of _____ (manufacturer location).

The server 12 is connected to the network 14 through a communication link
15 15 that enables the system 10 to be accessed by remote user or client terminals 16 and remote consultant terminals 18 that are also connected to the network 14 using separate communication links 19. The network 14 is a computer service, such as the World Wide Web, that enables respective terminals 16 and 18 to download or receive text and images transmitted from the system 10 through the network 14 for
20 display on the terminals 16 and 18.

Referring now to Fig. 2, in order for a user to access the system 10, the system 10 also includes a home page or portal 20 that comprises the electronic gateway between the network 14 and the functions of the system 10. The functions available on the system 10 include a registration function 22, a login function 23, a request
25 submission and processing function 24, a client administration function 26, a system administration function 28, a help function 30 and a user profile administration function 31.

The portal 20 is accessible by a user or consultant in a conventional manner from a remote terminal 16, 18 through the network 14 and provides general

information regarding the various functions 22-31 provided by the system 10. The portal 20 also enables a user to access one or more of the functions 22-31 provided by the system 10 depending upon the status of the user or consultant accessing the portal 20.

5 After accessing the portal 20, in order to access the functions 24, 26, 28 or 31 provided by the system 10, the user must first access and complete either the registration function 22 shown in Fig. 3 or the login function 23 shown in Fig. 4.

 Referring now to Fig. 3, when a user selects the registration function 22, the user is directed from the portal 20 to block 32. From block 32, the user accesses a
10 description of the system 10 in block 34 and is provided with various general information regarding the system 10 in block 36. After reviewing the information in block 36, the user is prompted in decision block 38 whether the user has an interest in becoming a registered user of the system 10.

 If in block 38 the user indicates that they are not interested in becoming a
15 registered user, the system 10 moves to block 40 which directs the user back to the portal 20. However, if the user indicates an interest in becoming a registered user, the system 10 proceeds to decision block 42 and ascertains whether the user is associated with an existing client. This determination can be made in a number of different ways. The preferred method is to prompt the user to indicate whether or not
20 they are associated with an existing client currently registered with the system, such as by entering a client ID number previously provided by the system 10 and stored in a database 43 with other information about the client.

 If the system 10 determines that the user is associated with an existing client
in block 42, the system 10 then prompts the user in block 44 to enter required
25 registration information about the user in order to obtain a client user ID number and password from the system 10. Before issuing the user an ID number and password in block 46, the system 10 will send an email to the previously identified existing client to notify that client of the issuance of the ID number and password to the user. After sending the message, in block 48 the ID number and password are issued and

forwarded to the terminal 16 by the system 10. The ID number and password for the particular user are further stored by the system 10 in a database 50 of registered client users so that each time the client user accesses the system 10, when the user submits the issued user ID number and password in the login function 23, the system 10 can
5 verify the ID number and password and enable the client user to enter the system 10. After storing the ID number and password, the user is directed back to the portal 20 in block 40 so that the user can access other functions of the system 10, such as the request submission function 24, if desired.

Alternatively, if in block 42 the system 10 determines that the user is not an
10 existing client, the system 10 directs the user to block 56 where the user or client is prompted to enter required and optional client/company registration information. The information is entered on an electronic form provided by the system 10 and includes, e.g., the business name, business address, telephone and fax numbers, and email address of the client user. If applicable, the user can also supply a list of
15 approved users that are associated with the client. The system 10 then takes this information and stores it in the client database 43 to create a record or file on the system 10 for the new client.

After the required registration information has been entered and recorded in the client database 43, the system 10 moves to block 58. Here the client is provided
20 with an electronic copy of the Terms and Conditions for the use of the system 10 and queried whether the client user will agree to the Terms and Conditions as specified. The client then indicates whether the Terms and Conditions are acceptable in block 60. The system 10 in block 62 then generates an email message that is sent to the system administrator to notify the administrator of the new client and to the new
25 client to provide a record of the decision concerning the Terms and Conditions.

If the client does not agree to the Terms and Conditions as specified block 60, the system 10 makes an internal notation represented by line 64 in the client information database 43 to contact the client at a later date to obtain a separate agreement to the Terms and Conditions from the client. This allows the client user to

propose and obtain modifications to the Terms and Conditions from the system administrator if necessary.

From block 62, the system 10 then proceeds to decision block 66 where the client is queried as to whether or not they wish to submit a consulting request. If the client declines to submit a request, the system 10 moves to decision block 67 in order to ascertain whether the registration information supplied in block 56 is valid. This determination can be made in a variety of ways. For example, a communication can be sent to the client outside of the system 10, such as via telephone, facsimile or regular mail, in order to verify that the registration information provided to the system 10 at block 56 is accurate. If the information is found to be inaccurate or if no response is received from the client user, the client registration information is determined not to be valid and the system 10 proceeds to block 68 to remove the client information supplied in block 56 from the database 43. Further, if the user is still connected to the system 10, the user is directed to the portal 20 in block 40 so that the user can leave the system 10 or re-enter the registration function 22.

However, if the registration information is found to be valid, the system 10 moves to block 69 where the client is issued a client ID number which is saved in the file for the particular client in database 43. From block 69 the client user can proceed to block 40 to access the portal 20 and utilize other functions provided by the system 10, if desired.

Alternatively, if in block 66 the client user wishes to submit a request, the system proceeds to block 70 where the client is provided with access to the request submission function 24 so that the client can supply the relevant information regarding the consulting request. This information required in the request includes, for example, the particular program employed by the client user, including the specific release of that program, the business area or topic that the request pertains to, the question or request, and the priority of the request. The system 10, while applicable to consulting services provided for any type of computer program or operating system, was designed specifically for use with the SAP® business

networking software system and includes the ability to specify particular versions, modules and sub-modules of this system.

Information about the client can be input on the form by the user, but also may be automatically retrieved from the database 43 and inserted into the proper fields on the form by the system 10 when the request submission form is initially presented to the user.

Once the user has completed the request submission function 24, the system 10 proceeds to decision block 67 where the system 10 ascertains whether the new client registration information submitted in block 56 is accurate. If the registration information is found to be valid, the system 10 moves to block 69 where the system 10 issues client ID number to the user as stated previously. Alternatively, if the registration information is determined to be invalid, the system 10 moves to block 68 and deletes the request and the client information from a temporary storage location within the database 43. The system 10 then directs the user back to the portal 20 at block 40 so that the user can exit the system 10 or resubmit the correct registration information using the registration function 22.

After the user has completed the registration function 22, consequently obtaining the client ID number and client user ID number and password, each successive time the user accesses the system 10, the user can enter the system 10 using the login function 23 illustrated in Fig. 4. Once a user selects the login function 23 on portal 20 in block 72, the user is presented with a login screen in block 73. Once the screen is presented, in block 74 the user enters the user ID number and password previously supplied to the user by the system 10. A user ID number and password are issued to all users of the system 10, including client users, consultants, client administrators and system administrators. However, the ID numbers for each type of user differ such that the system 10 can identify the type of user based on the specific ID number for the user. The ID numbers and passwords for each user are stored in a database of all users 75 located in the system 10.

After the user has entered the ID and password, the system 10 proceeds to decision block 76 and ascertains whether the ID number and password supplied by the user are found within the database 75. If not, the system 10 moves to block 72 and directs the user to re-enter the ID number and password or to return to the portal 20. However, if the ID number and password are validated, i.e., found in data base 75, the system 10 moves to block 77 and inquires whether the user wishes to update the profile stored on the system 10 for the user. If the user answers in the affirmative, the system 10 moves to block 78 and directs the user to the user profile administration function 31, which will be described later.

10 If the user does not wish to update the profile, the system 10 moves to block 79 and determines if the user is either a client user or a consultant utilizing the ID number supplied by the user. If so, the user is directed to block 79a in which the user proceeds to the request submission function 28.

However, if the ID number supplied by the user does not identify the user as either a client user or a consultant, the system 10 moves to decision block 80 and determines whether the user is a client administrator based on the ID number supplied by the user. If yes, the system 10 moves to block 80a and directs the user to the client administration function 26. However, if the user is not identified as a client administrator, the system 10 then directs the user to block 80b in order to access the system administration function 28, as the user is then identified as a system administrator.

20 Once a client user has completed either the registration function 22 or the login function 23, each time the client user logs back into the system 10 using the login function 23, the client user may submit a request form to the system 10 utilizing the request submission and processing function 24, schematically illustrated in Fig. 5. When a client user selects the request submission and processing function 24 from the portal 20 in block 81, the system 10 provides the user with an electronic form in block 82 on which the client can enter information

regarding the particular request, as described previously with respect to the registration function 22.

When the user receives the form, the user is also queried by the system 10 whether the user is going to attach any documentation to the form in decision block 83. If documents are to be attached, in block 84 the user browses the form and attaches the documentation electronically to the form in the appropriate location on the form. The documentation can be attached to the form in a number of ways, such as simply cutting and pasting the documentation to the form or by copying the documentation as an attachment to the form in a conventional manner. Once the documentation is attached, or if there is no documentation to be attached to the form, the system 10 then moves to block 85 in which the user completes the insertion of the detailed information concerning the request on the form and submits the form to the system 10. When the system 10 receives the completed form, initially the system 10 stores the request in a database of consulting requests 86 on a file for the particular client with whom the client user is associated.

Once the request has been stored in a database 86, the system 10 then reviews the form to determine which particular business area, or SAP® module and sub-module, has been identified on the form. Preferably, the business is identified by the selection by the client user of one area from a list of different business areas provided on the request submission form. The system 10 then accesses a database of consultants 87 to locate the particular consultant or consultants associated with the selected business area and assigns that consultant to the particular request in block 88. Furthermore, if the request identifies a particular consultant with whom the client user wishes to work, this is taken into account by the system 10 when assigning a consultant.

The consultants whose information is contained in the database 87 can include both in-house consultants who provide the consulting services from the location of the system 10, and remote consultants who provide the consulting services from locations other than that of the system 10. The particular consultant

can be chosen by the system 10 pursuant to one of a number of acceptable methods, such as on a revolving basis, or by designating one of the consultants as an “on-call” consultant who handles all requests concerning a certain business area for a specified period of time.

5 After assigning the consultant, the system 10 then generates a confirmation email which is sent to the client user, to the consultant and to the system administrator in block 90 confirming the receipt and assignment of the submitted request. When the consultant receives the email confirmation, the consultant will access the system 10 and review the request in block 92.

10 Once the consultant has reviewed the request in block 92, in block 94 the consultant contacts the user to obtain any further information available regarding the request that is not contained on the form. In doing so, the consultant will ascertain the exact nature of the problem, or “scope out” the problem contained in the request. The consultant documents the results of this process and uploads this
15 documentation onto the system 10 in block 96. The uploading of this documentation can be performed in any conventional manner, but is preferably performed by electronically copying the documentation to the request file located in database 86. The documentation is then stored by the system 10 in the particular file in the database 86 for the client user’s request. This enables any person,
20 including a consultant, client or system administrator, or client user having the requisite information, such as the file number, to access the particular file in database 86 on the system 10 and review the uploaded information regarding the particular request submission.

 Once the consultant has received all of the necessary information regarding
25 the issue presented in the request and uploaded this information to the system 10, the consultant decides in decision block 98 whether or not to accept the request. If the consultant feels that he does not have the expertise necessary to fully answer or otherwise competently address the client user’s question or consulting request, in decision block 100 the consultant decides whether to assign the request to another

consultant. In making this determination, the system administrator reviews the consultant's reasons for declining the request, and if the system administrator believes the request can be handled by another consultant, the system administrator will direct the system 10 back to block 102 to assign another consultant, who again
5 scopes out the request in block 94.

However, in the event that no consultant associated with the system 10 is capable of fulfilling the request submitted by the client, in block 104 the system administrator or consultant will decline the request and inform the client user with an email message sent through the system 10. The message may also include any
10 alternative possible or suggested individuals or firms who may be able to fulfill the client user's request.

If in decision block 98 the consultant determines that he can fulfill the client user's request, in block 106 the consultant uploads to the particular file in the database 86 all of the documentation generated by the consultant regarding the
15 decision to accept the request. The system 10 then sends an email message to the consultant and client user verifying the acceptance of the request in block 108.

Blocks 110 to 113 illustrate the process used by the system 10 to arrive at an answer to the consultant request. Initially, in block 110 the consultant begins to develop a solution to the request, i.e., processes the request. Each time the
20 consultant generates documentation regarding the request, this documentation is uploaded to the database 86 in block 111 so that it may be reviewed at any time by the client user. Furthermore, the system 10 sends an email notification to the client user informing the client user of the additional documentation being uploaded onto the system 10 in block 112. The documentation uploaded in block 112 may also
25 include all documentation created throughout the processing of the request in order to form a complete record of the process performed by the consultant, including all of the steps taken by the consultant during the processing of the request. Finally, in decision block 113, the system 10 allows the consultant to decide whether the newly uploaded documentation effectively provides the resolution for the request.

If not, the consultant returns to block 110 and continues to process the request. However, if a resolution to the request is provided, the client user accesses the uploaded resolution in block 114 and can implement the solution arrived at by the consultant.

5 Throughout the process in which the consultant is preparing a solution or recommendation for the request, the consultant utilizes an electronic timesheet provided by the system 10. These timesheets are also stored in the particular file in database 86 for the request to document all hours worked by the consultant on the particular request. Thus, the timesheets can be reviewed by the client user or the
10 consultant to determine the exact amount of billable time expended by the consultant at any point throughout the process. Once the request has been fulfilled by providing a solution or recommendation to the client user, in block 115 the system 10 forwards the completed timesheet to the client user as a statement or bill for the consulting services provided to the client user. The payment for the
15 consultant services can be paid by conventional means, such as by the submission of a check or money order to the system administrator. Alternatively, the payment can be made electronically from a deposit account from which the system administrator is authorized to withdraw funds, or from a credit card whose account number and other relevant information has been provided to the administrator by
20 the client.

Once a previously registered client user has accessed the system 10 through the portal 20 and supplied the required client and user passwords and ID numbers, as opposed to submitting a request form in block 24, the client user may also select the client administration function 26, shown in Fig. 6, to access a number of
25 subfunctions provided by the system 10 in order to review and change information contained on the system 20 concerning that client. The subfunctions provided under the client administration function 26 include the consulting request reporting subfunction 116, the consulting request detail subfunction 118, the add request subfunction 120 and the change client information subfunction 122.

The consulting request reporting subfunction 116 allows the client or a client administrator to access all requests that have been submitted by all client users associated with the particular client. The client administrator can view the requests, by client or user, by category, by status, by consultant, and by priority. The client administrator may also change the information in any one of these fields for each request in order to more accurately represent the status of a request at that time. For example, a client administrator may change the priority of a particular request in order to reflect a change in the importance of the request to the client. This subfunction 116 also allows a client administrator to review past requests in order to determine if a particular request was addressed previously, in order to avoid the duplication of work that has already been performed.

The client administrator may also select the consulting request detail subfunction 118. Under this subfunction 118, the client administrator may view each previous or outstanding request submitted by all client users associated with that client and stored in database 86 in detail, including a more extensive description of the request, all of the documents which have been uploaded to the system 10 by the consultant for this request, and a summary of the hours worked on the request by the assigned consultant up to and including that specific date.

A third subfunction available under the client administration function 26 is the add request subfunction 120. This subfunction 120 enables the client administrator to move directly to the request submission and processing function 24 and submit an additional request to the system 10. This subfunction 120 becomes especially applicable if the client administrator, while reviewing past and currently outstanding requests, determines that a separate request that needs to be addressed has not been adequately expressed in any previously submitted request.

The last subfunction available under the client administration function 26 is the change client information subfunction 122. Using this subfunction 122, the client administrator for the particular client who oversees all of the activity of individual client users on the client account can monitor and alter the information

and authorization provided to client users of that account. More specifically, the client administrator can access the ID numbers and passwords for each authorized user associated with that client and create, change, or deactivate a particular user from the list of authorized users for that client. The client administrator can also
5 update the information on the particular client using subfunction 122, such as the registration and billing information for that client user by accessing the client information database 43.

The fourth function available on the system 10 is the system administration function 28, schematically illustrated in Fig. 7. The system administration function
10 28 enables a system administrator, after accessing the system 10 using a system or master ID number and password, to monitor the overall operation of the system 10. The system administration function 28 provides six separate subfunctions for this purpose, namely, a manage notifications subfunction 123, a consulting requests subfunction 124, a manage users subfunction 126, a manage business category and
15 consultant subfunction 128, a view feedback subfunction 130 and a manage lists subfunction 131.

When a user selects the manage notification subfunction 123, the user gains access to a database of email notifications 124 that contains a master copy of each of the email messages and notifications sent out by the system 10 at various stages
20 throughout the registration and request submission processes. The system administrator can alter the language to be used in these email notifications that are sent out to clients, client users, consultants, and to the system administrator in order to reflect any changes in the overall operation of the system 10.

Under the consulting requests subfunction 125, the system administrator can
25 view all previously submitted requests and all requests currently being processed through the system 10. The system administrator can view the requests by company, by contact, by category, by status, by consultant, and by priority, similarly to the subfunction 116 found under the client administration function 26. This information can be used by the system administrator for a variety of purposes

including, but not limited to, determining the overall effectiveness of the system 10 in processing requests for comparing the system 10 with conventional consulting services, providing a determination of the effectiveness and efficiency of various consultants or groups of consultants registered on the system 10, and ascertaining what clients and client users utilize the system with the greatest frequency. This information can then be used by the system administrator to provide additional information to both current and prospective clients and client users and consultants regarding the performance of the system 10. This additional information can take the form of objective ratings of the various consultants based on historical performance and feedback data, offers of reduced cost consulting services to those client users that utilize the system 10 for more than a predetermined number of requests as an incentive to use the system 10, and comparisons of the overall costs of on-site and on-line consulting services to illustrate the effectiveness of the system 10 to process consulting requests, among others.

The third subfunction available under the system administration function 28 is the manage users subfunction 126. The manage users subfunction 126 enables the system administrator to access a database 127 of all users of the system 10 and add, delete or update the information regarding any user of the system 10 in a manner similar to that done under the change client information subfunction 122. This subfunction 126 enables the system administrator to control the information stored on and used by the system 10 for each client, client user and consultant so that the system 10 may run as efficiently as possible.

Similarly to the manage users subfunction 126, the fourth subfunction available under the system administration function 28, the manage business category and consultants subfunction 128, enables the system administrator to access a database of consultants 129 and add, delete or update the information regarding the business areas, e.g., SAP® modules and sub-modules, covered by the system 10 and/or associated with any specific consultant or group of consultants in the database 129, including the business areas to which the consultants are

assigned. Thus, the system administrator can consistently update the information regarding the consultants such that no request submitted by a client user is directed to a consultant no longer associated with the system 10 or to a consultant who is no longer accepting requests in a specified business area. The system administrator
5 can also use this subfunction 128 to add or remove business areas from the description of the system 10 to reflect the business areas for which consulting services can be offered through the system 10.

The fifth subfunction provided under the system administration function 28 is the view feedback subfunction 130. The view feedback subfunction 130 enables
10 the system administrator to view comments submitted by client users and consultants regarding the operation and efficiency of the system 10. Based on this feedback, the system administrator can address any questions or problems with the system 10 that are pointed out in the comments made by the client users and consultants.

15 The final subfunction available under the system administration function 28 is the manage lists subfunction 131. Under this subfunction, the system administrator has access to a database of textual materials 132 in which are located all of the text documents utilized by the system. These documents include, for example, the Terms and Conditions and the request submission form, specifically
20 the list of business areas or SAP® versions, modules and sub-modules available for selection on the form. When accessing the database 132, the system administrator can alter the language of the forms contained in the database 132 to reflect changes made by the operators of the system 10 to the Terms and Conditions or to the business areas for which consulting services can be provided by the system 10.

25 The next function available on the system 10 is the help function 30 schematically illustrated in Fig. 8. The help function 30 provides client users and consultants with a feedback subfunction 133, a system information subfunction 134 and a contact subfunction 136 that assist these client users and consultants in the operation of the system 10.

The feedback subfunction 133 allows a client user or consultant to send questions or comments regarding the operation or effectiveness of the system 10 directly to the system administrator, as described previously with regard to the view feedback subfunction 130.

5 The system information subfunction 134 provides a client user with information regarding the system 10, including the overall organization of the system 10, e.g., a site map, and an explanation of each area of the system 10 in order to direct the user to the appropriate or desired area of the system 10.

10 Finally, the contact subfunction 136 enables a client user to contact the system administrator directly such as, for example, to ask a question regarding sensitive subject matter that cannot be answered using the more general system information subfunction 134, or a question that must be answered prior to the normal response period for the system administrator when utilizing the feedback subfunction 133.

15 The final function provided by the system 10 is the user profile administration function 31 schematically illustrated in Fig. 9. When this function is selected, the user gains access to the database 127 of all the users of the system 10. The user may then select the profile stored on the database 127 associated with that particular user and update the profile by submitting an updated version of the
20 profile to the system 10 in block 138 that is to be stored in the database 127.

25 While the above description currently illustrates the best mode of carrying out the invention, the system 10 may also incorporate other features, functions and subfunctions in addition to those already present that enhance the usefulness of the system 10 for registered client users. Examples of these enhancements may include, but are not limited to: a chat room for facilitating an online real-time discussion between the client user and the consultant; a keyword search engine to search a database of previously submitted questions, issues and requests and the associated answers; electronic processing of payments by client users; a remote consulting engagement tracking system to track system usage by clients and

individual client users; client user authentication/login functionality; client user recognition functionality; historical question tracking for each client user; work load monitoring and balancing for consultants; and electronic mailings to prospective clients.

5 Further, the system 10 can be implemented on the server 12 utilizing any one of the numerous programming languages compatible with the World Wide Web because the specific programming necessary to implement the specific functions provided by the system 10 correctly is well known in the art.

10 The system of the invention may be utilized to provide on-line consulting support for any type of product or process. While that system of the invention has been shown and described with respect to software support, it is understood that the system may also be used to provide consulting support for computer hardware, machinery, equipment, manufacturing processes, etc. In addition, while the system of the invention has been shown and described with respect to a global computer
15 network, i.e., the internet, it is understood that the system of the invention may be employed in connection with any type of computer network, such as an intranet affiliated with a company or other organization.

20 Various alternatives are contemplated as being within the scope of the following claims particularly pointing out and distinctly claiming the subject matter regarded as the invention.

CLAIMS

I claim:

1. A method for providing consulting services over a computer network, the method comprising the steps of:
 - (a) providing a system capable of sending and receiving information over the computer network;
 - 5 (b) receiving a consulting request on the system from a user by a first remote terminal connected to the network;
 - (c) assigning the request to a consultant; and
 - (d) processing the request.
2. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of sending a response from the system to the user over the network acknowledging the request after assigning the request to a consultant.
3. The method of claim 2 wherein the computer network is a global computer network.
4. The method of claim 2 wherein the computer network is an internal computer network.
5. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of sending a billing statement to the user after processing the request.
6. The method of claim 5 wherein the step of sending the billing statement comprises electronically forwarding the statement to the user over the computer network.
7. The method of claim 5 further comprising the step of receiving payment from the user after sending the billing statement to the user.
8. The method of claim 7 wherein the step of receiving payment comprises electronically transferring funds from an account owned by the user.
9. The method of claim 8 wherein the account is a credit card account.
10. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of sending an answer to the request to the user over the network after processing the request.

11. The method of claim 10 wherein the step of processing the request includes the steps of:

- a) determining the subject matter of the problem contained in the request; and
- 5 b) producing the answer to the problem.

12. The method of claim 11 wherein the step of producing the answer to the problem further comprises the steps of:

- a) uploading documentation to the system over the network; and
- b) storing the documentation on the system.

13. The method of claim 12 wherein the step of storing the documentation includes the steps of:

- a) creating a file on the system associated with the particular request; and
- 5 b) placing the documentation in the file.

14. The method of claim 13 wherein the documentation includes consultant timesheets, consultant notes, client suggestions, client observations, and other client provided data.

15. The method of claim 13 wherein the file can be accessed through the system by the consultant and by the user.

16. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of assigning the request to a consultant is performed by determining if the request has specified a particular consultant.

17. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of assigning the request to a consultant further comprises the steps of:

- a) searching a database of consultants located on the system for a list of available consultants;
- 5 b) selecting an available consultant from the list; and
- c) forwarding the request to that consultant.

18. The method of claim 17 wherein the step of forwarding the request to the consultant further comprises the step of sending the request to a second remote terminal connected to the network and utilized by the consultant.

19. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of registering the user prior to receiving the consulting request from the user.

20. The method of claim 19 wherein the step of registering the user further comprises the steps of:

- a) obtaining registration information from the user; and
- b) storing the registration information in a user database located on
5 the system.

21. The method of claim 20 further comprising the step of modifying the registration information after storing the registration information in the user database.

22. The method of claim 21 wherein the step of modifying the registration information is performed by the user.

23. A system for receiving and processing consulting requests over a computer network concerning computer programs and operating systems from a first remote terminal, the system comprising:

a first data storage means including a client information database, the client
5 information database including client registration information and user registration information;

a second data storage means including a consultant information database, the consultant information database including consultant information and area of expertise information for each consultant; and

10 a data processor coupled to the first data storage means and the second data storage means, the data processor configured to receive consulting requests from a user on the first remote terminal, to review the requests for information on the subject matter of the requests, to search the second storage means for consultants familiar with the subject matter of the request, to assign the request to a consultant

15 familiar with the request subject matter, and to facilitate communications between the user and the assigned consultant.

24. The system of claim 23 wherein the first data storage means includes a consulting request database.

25. The system of claim 24 wherein the consulting request database includes consulting request information.

26. The system of claim 25 wherein the consulting request information includes the consulting requests, all of the documentation created by the consultant during the processing of the consulting request, and an electronic timesheet.

27. The system of claim 23 wherein the communications between the user and the assigned consultant are email communications.

28. The system of claim 23 wherein the data processor is further configured to forward the request to a second remote terminal utilized by the consultant after assigning the request to the consultant.

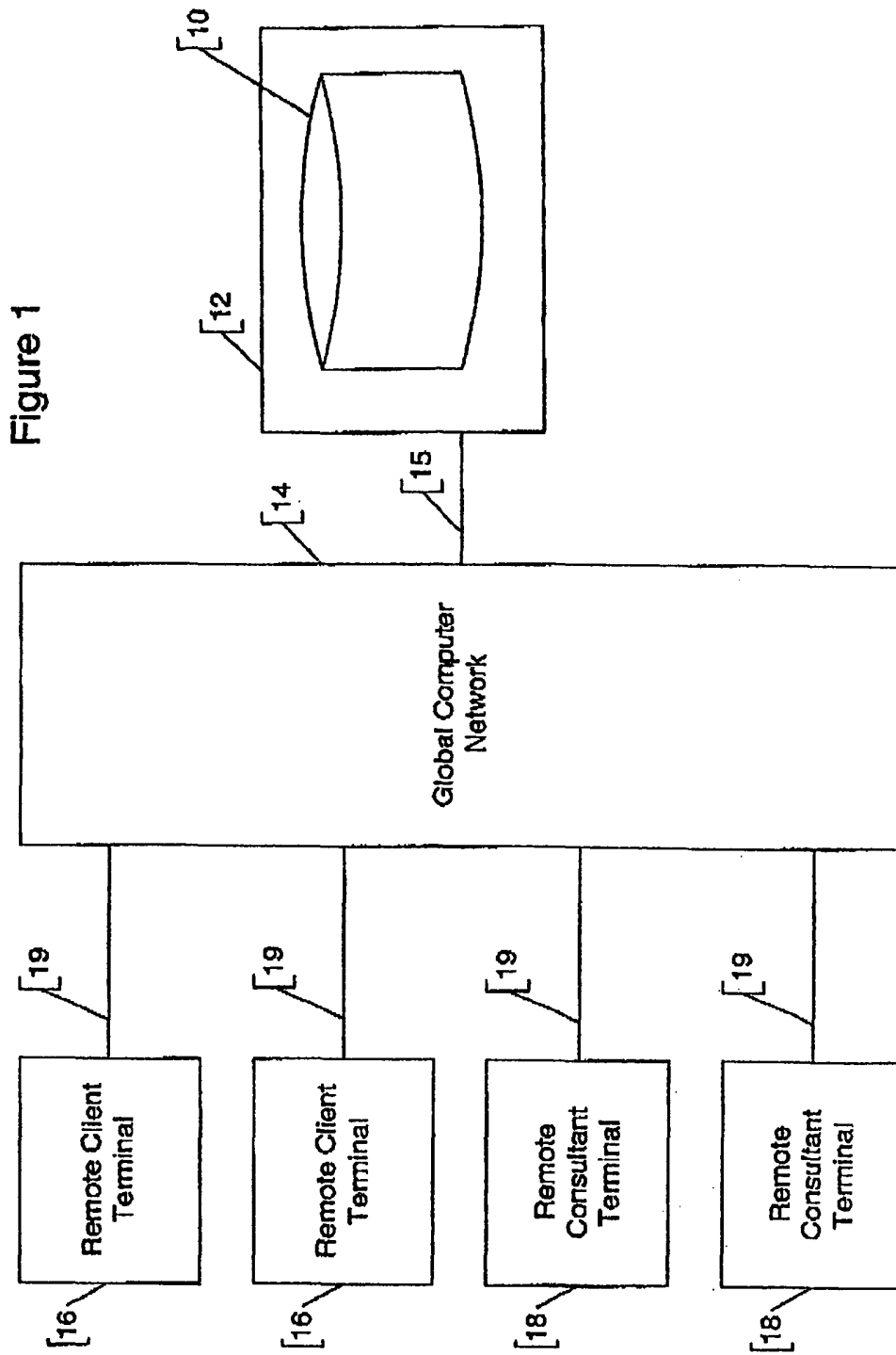
29. The system of claim 28 wherein the data processor is configured to facilitate communications between the first remote terminal and the second remote terminal.

30. The system of claim 23 wherein the data processor is configured to receive registration information from a user.

31. The system of claim 23 wherein the data processor is configured to receive changes to the requests from the user.

32. The system of claim 23 wherein the data processor is configured to assign the requests to consultants familiar with the subject matter of the request on a revolving basis.

33. The system of claim 23 wherein the data processor is configured to assign the requests to an on-call consultant familiar with the request subject matter.



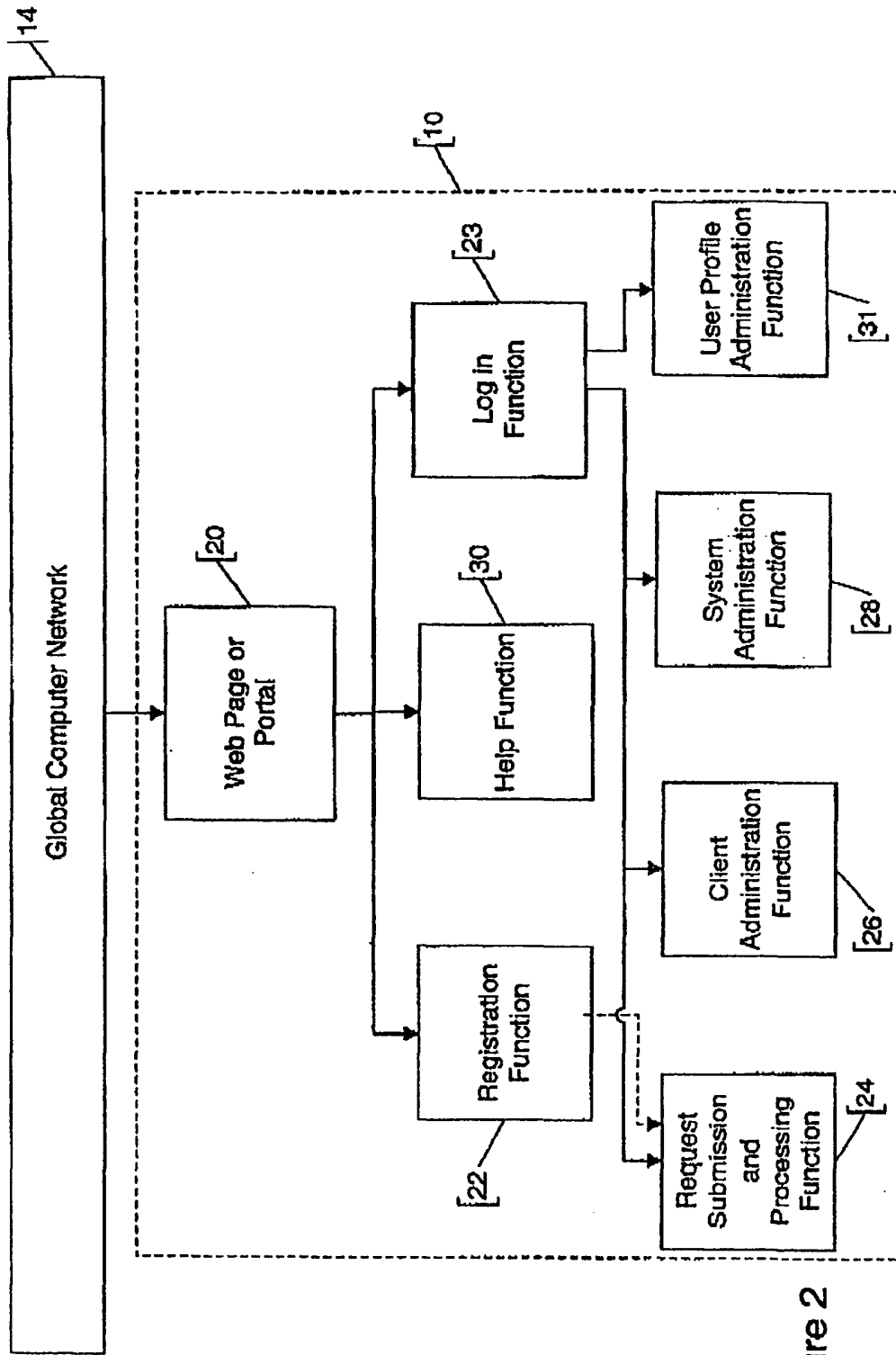


Figure 2

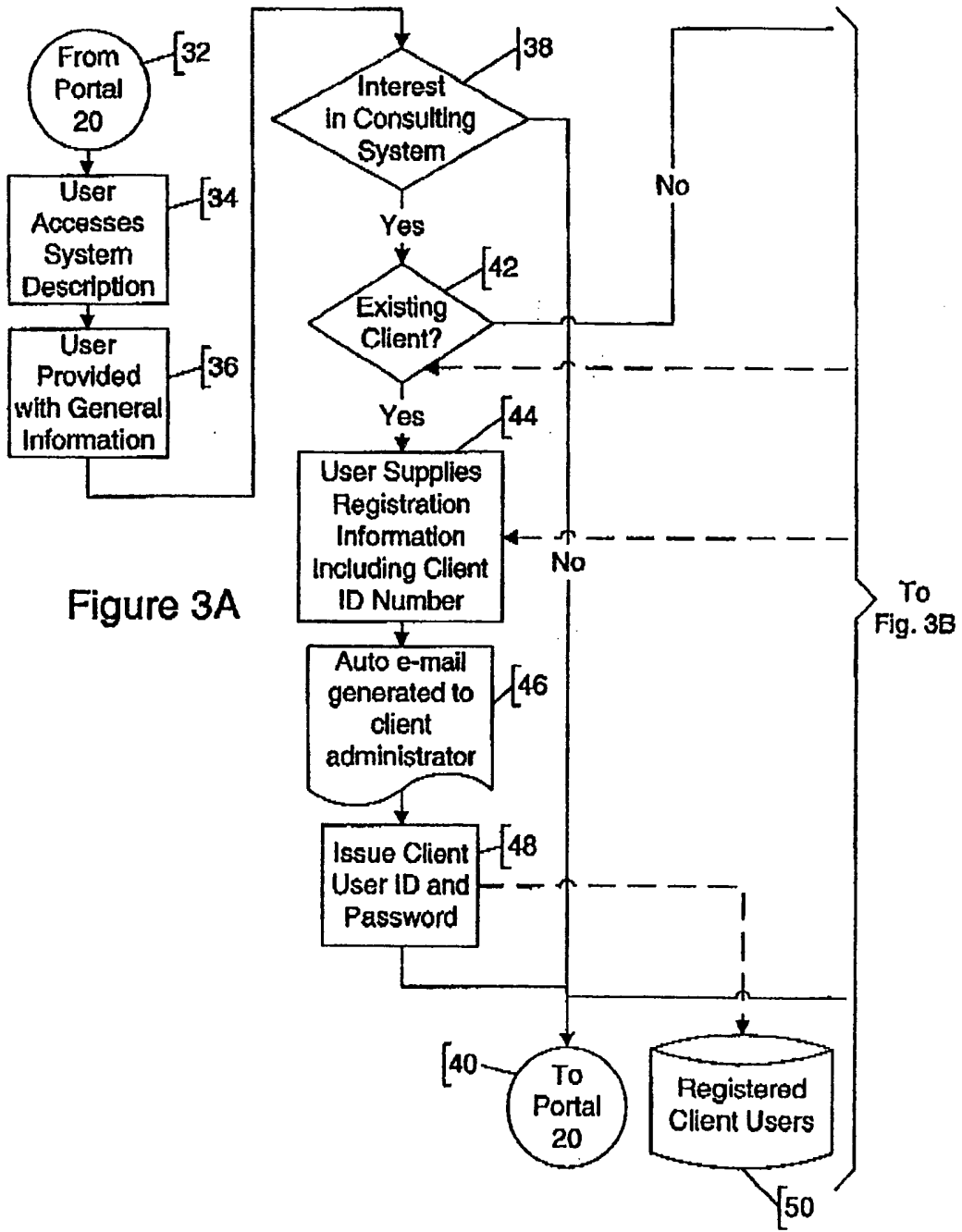


Figure 3A

To Fig. 3B

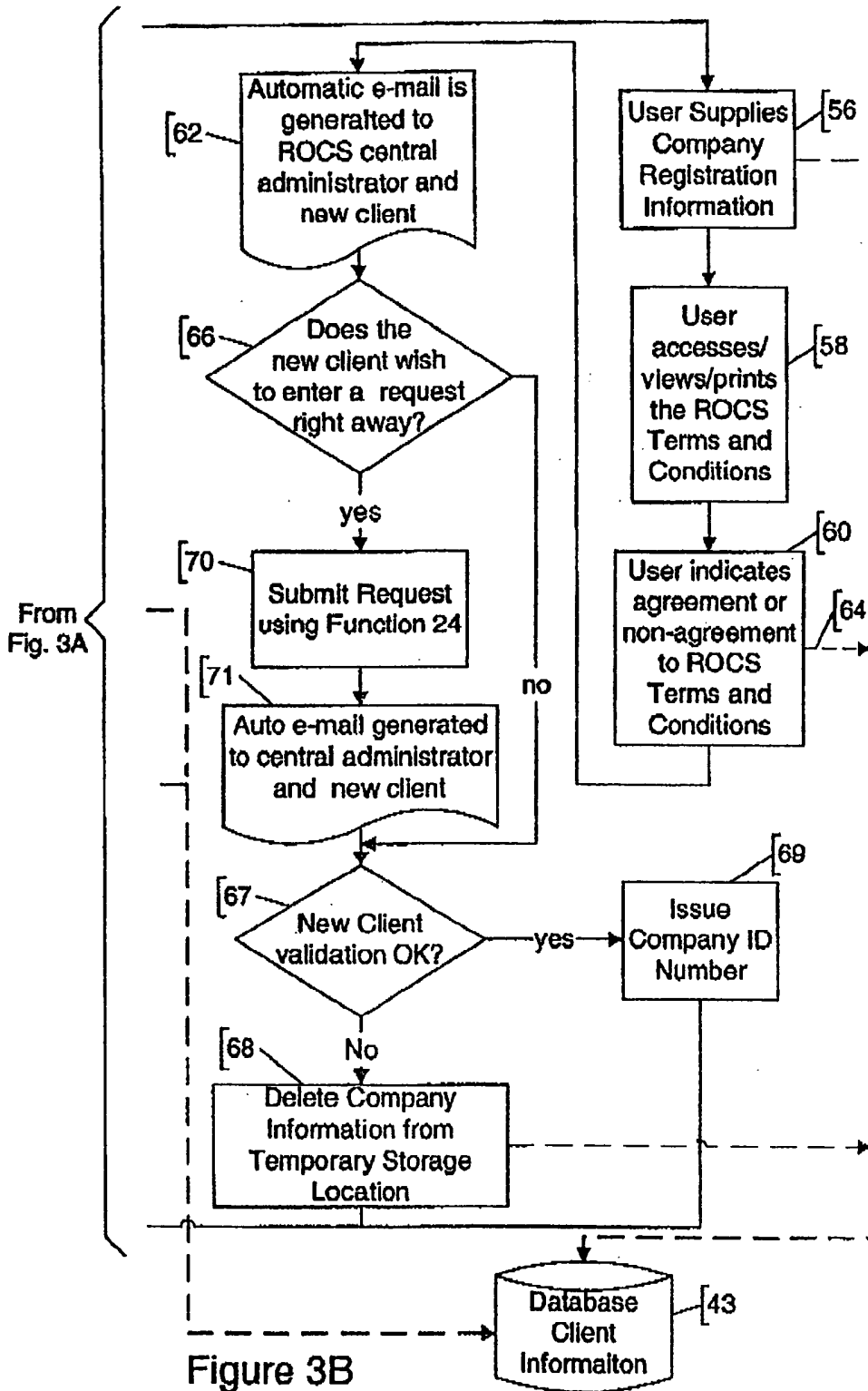
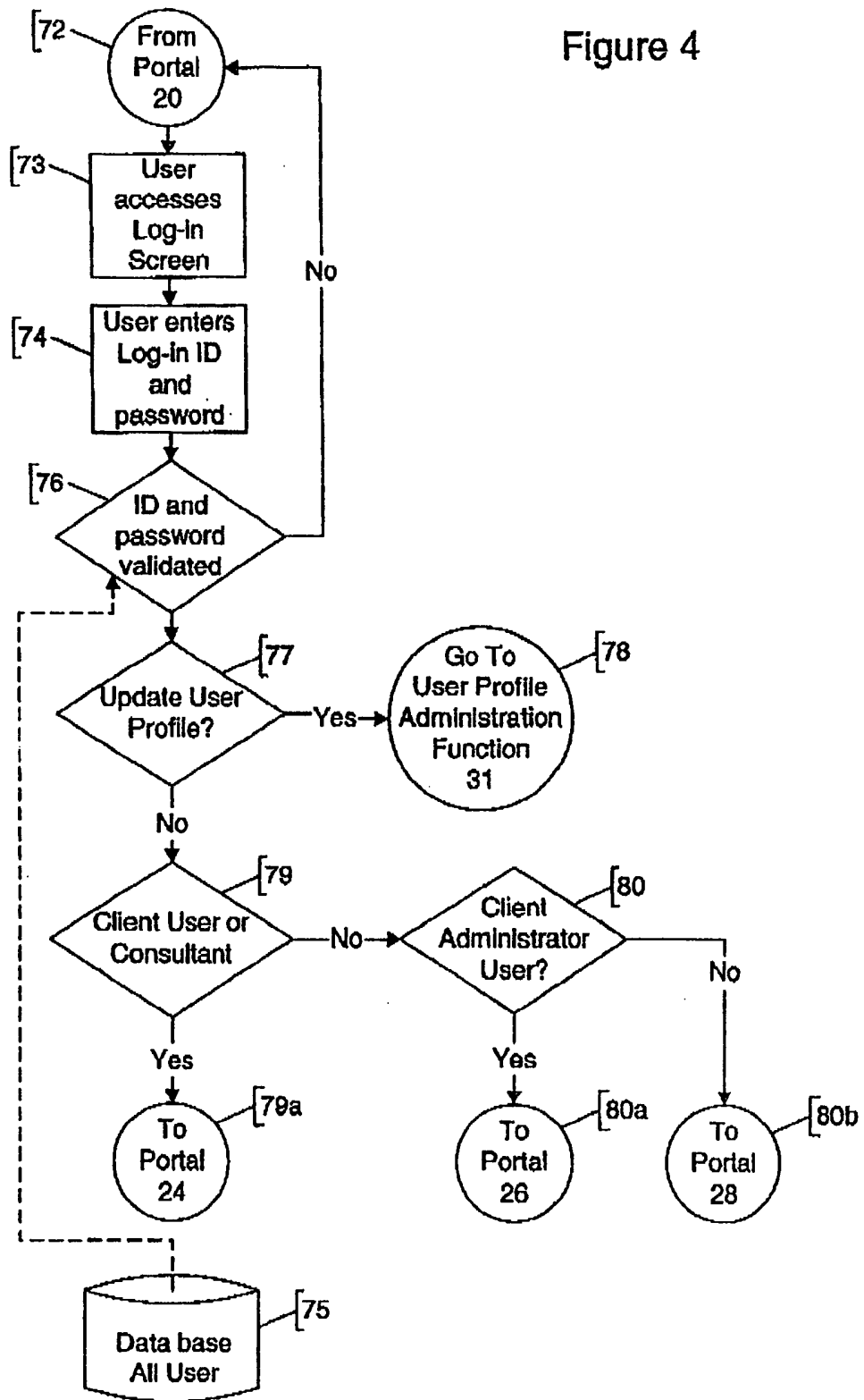
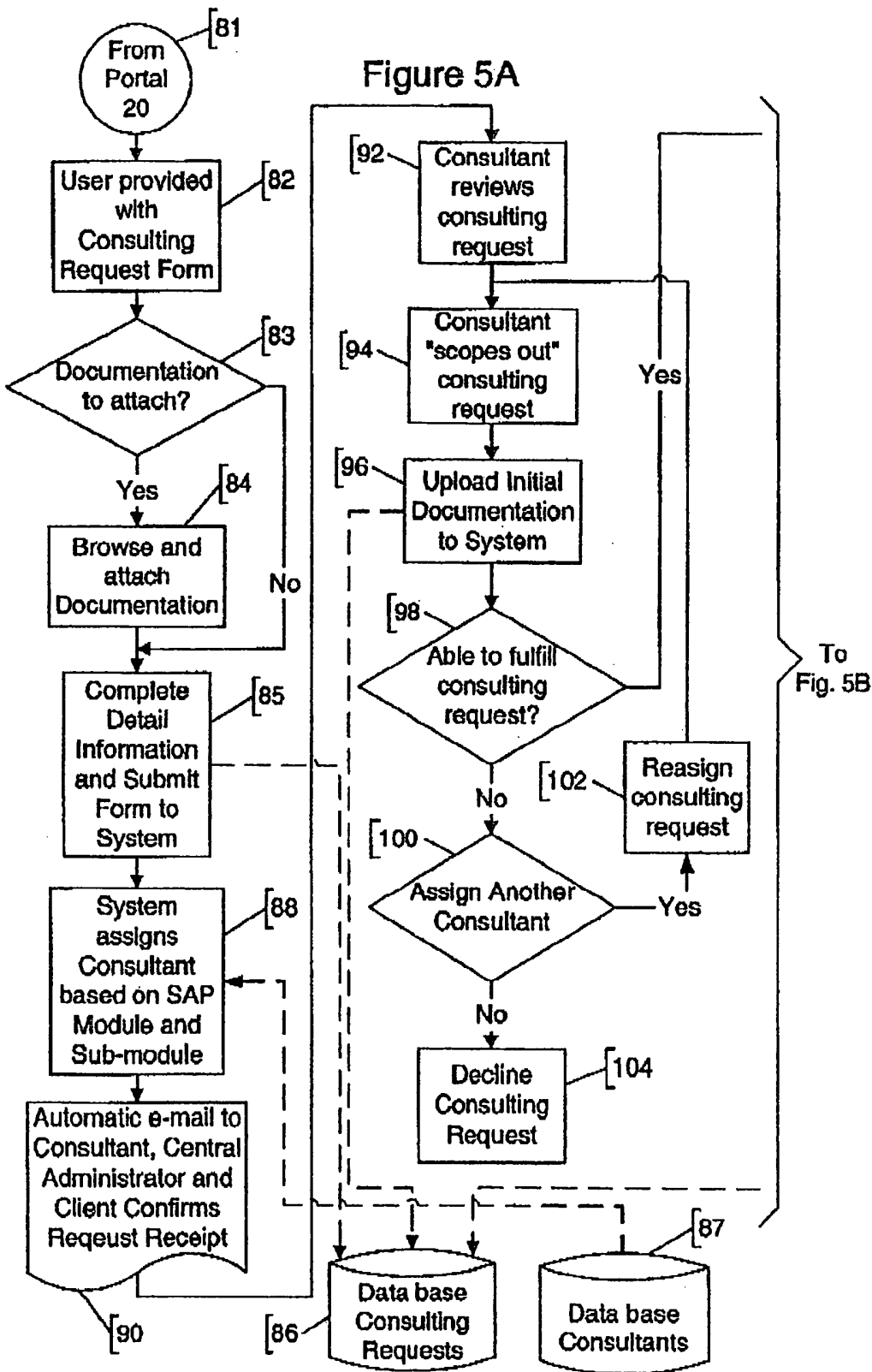


Figure 3B

Figure 4





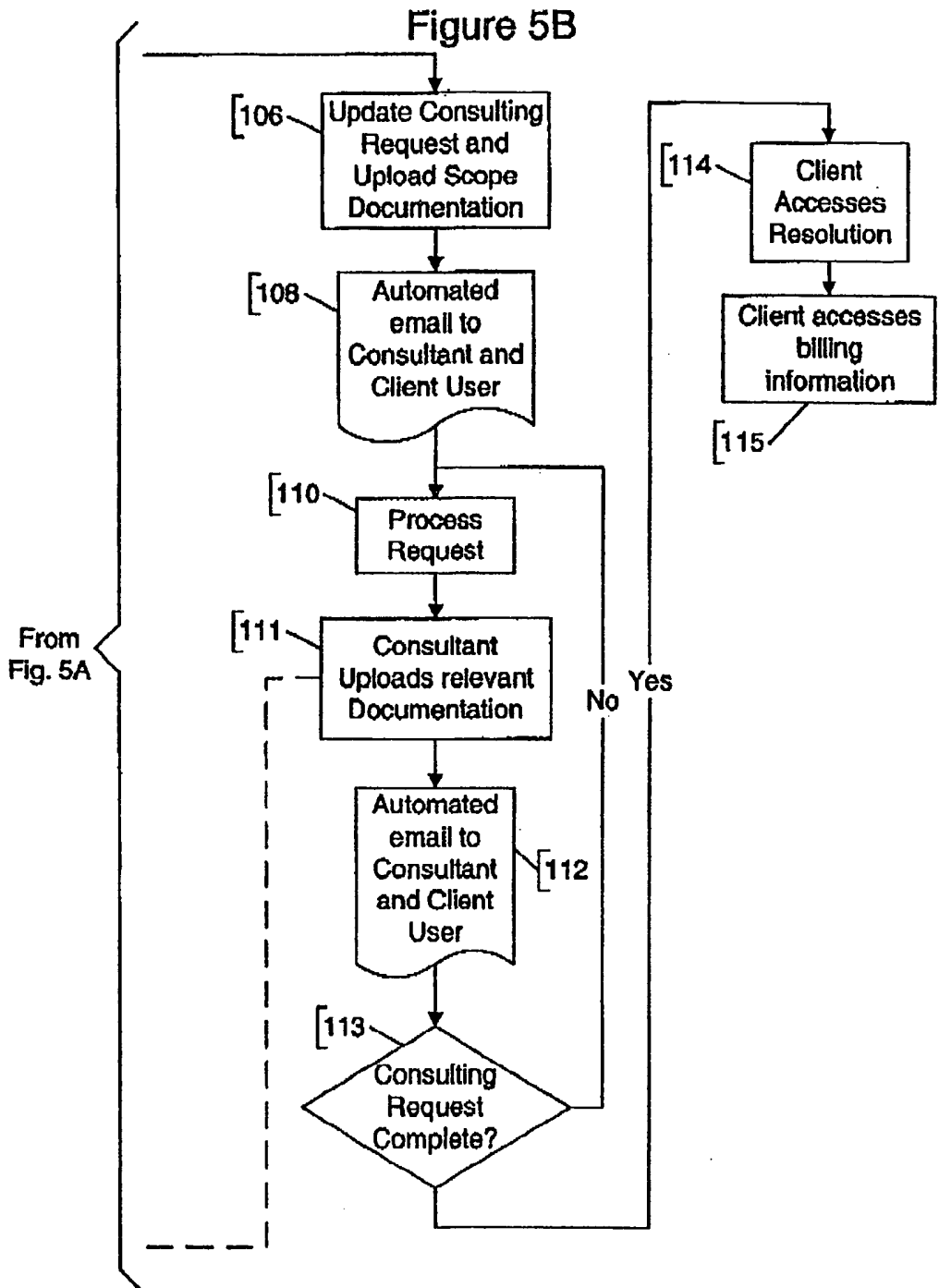
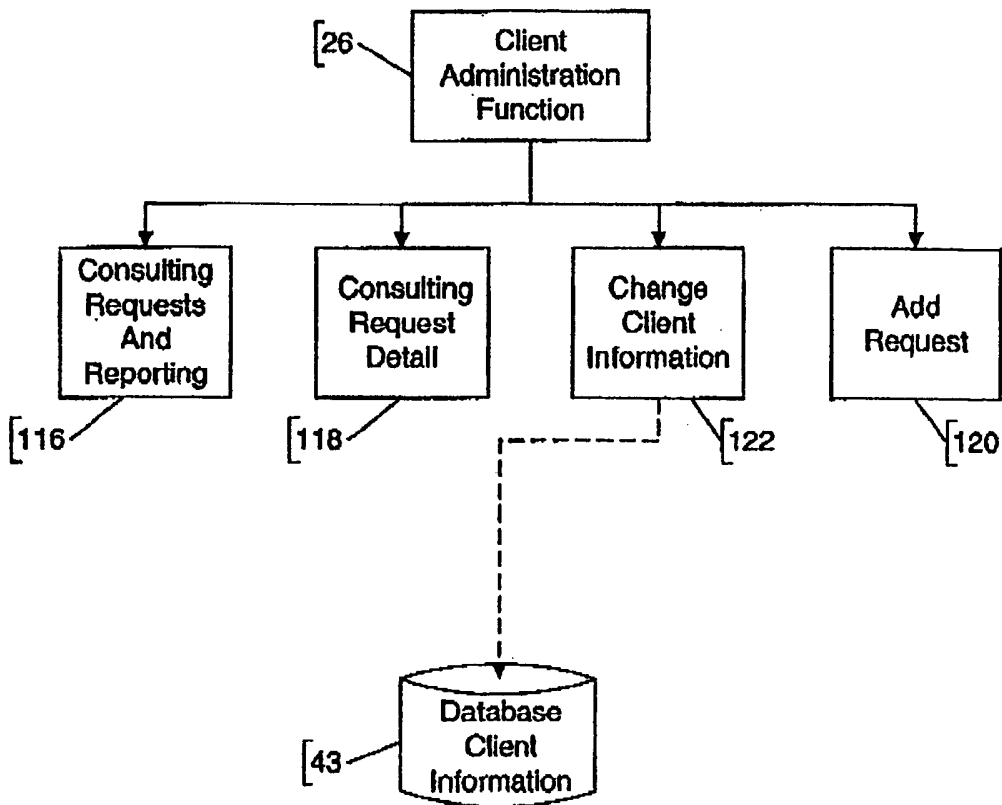


Figure 6



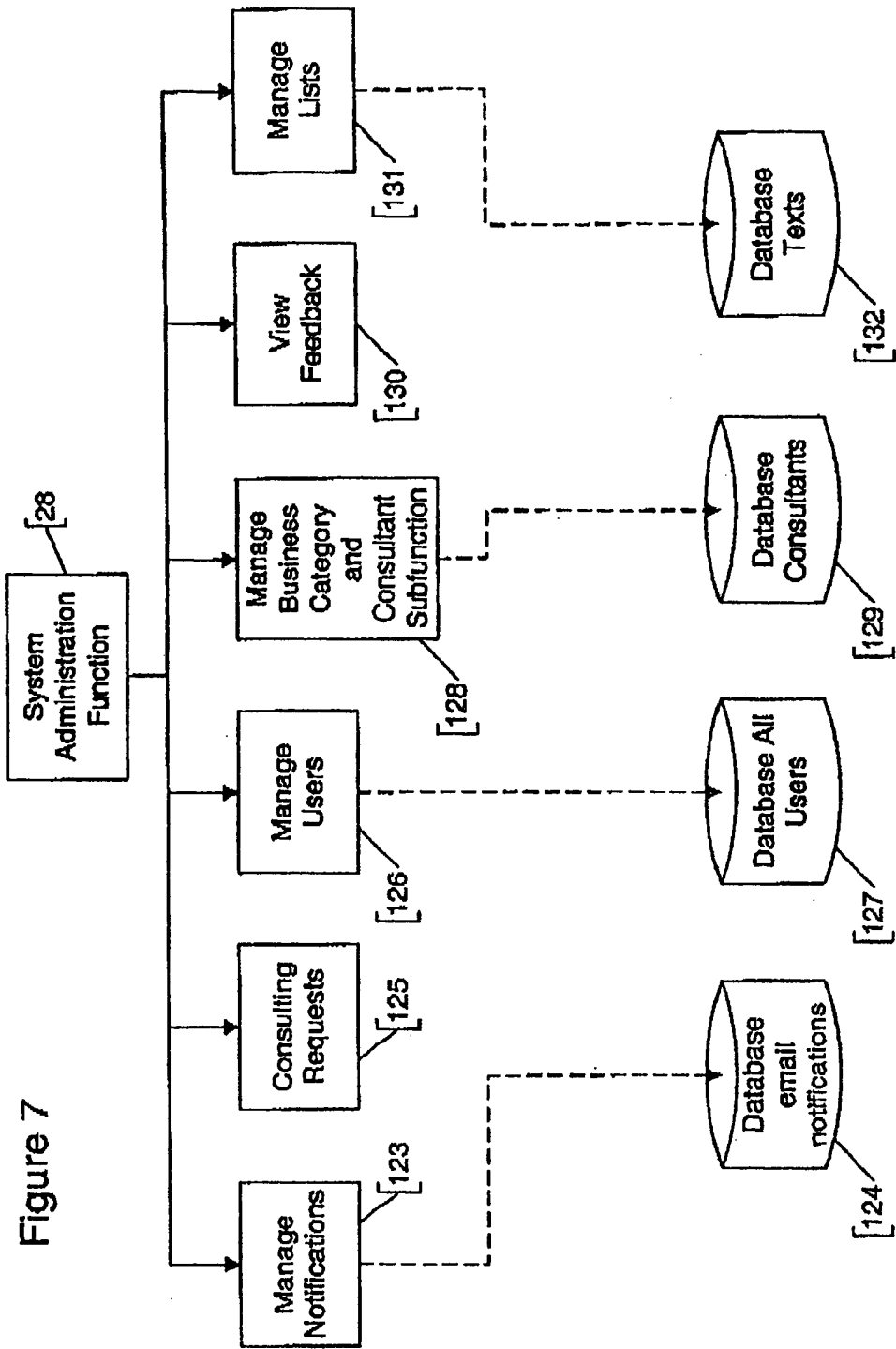


Figure 7

Figure 8

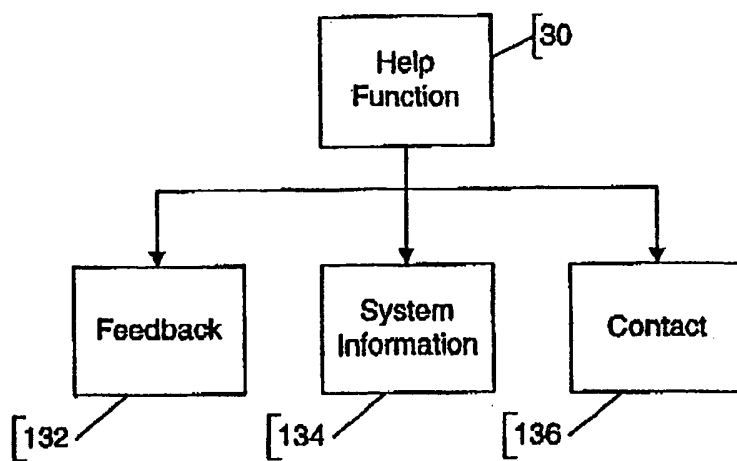


Figure 9

