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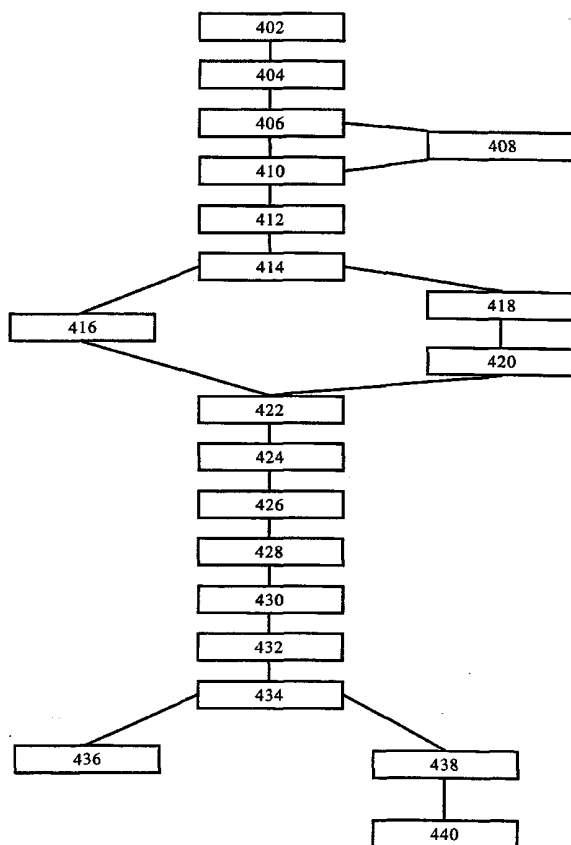
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(54) Title: SYSTEM FOR HIRING AND ENGAGEMENT MANAGEMENT OF QUALIFIED PROFESSIONALS



(57) Abstract: A computerized system (20) facilitates the hiring and managing of professionals for particular projects of clients on a term or contract basis. Professionals, contractors, or consultants register (402) to participate within the computerized system (20). Resume information is submitted (410-426) using a standardized format to generate a professional's profile. Profiles can be screened and validated (438), and then assigned (436, 440, 852) a quality level assurance by the system; however, the identity of each professional in the database is maintained in confidence. Companies or clients post (612) projects within the database using (634) the same standardized templates for identifying skills and experiences required of professionals hired for the posted project. Projects may be searched (512) and reviewed (520) by selected criteria. Professionals may view (524) or request (526) additional information and bid (528) on projects without revealing their identity.



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**SYSTEM FOR HIRING AND ENGAGEMENT MANAGEMENT**  
**OF QUALIFIED PROFESSIONALS**

**FIELD OF THE PRESENT INVENTION**

5           The present invention relates broadly to electronic business to business applications using computer network systems, such as the Internet, and, more particularly, to a method and system for facilitating the hiring and management of qualified professionals for particular projects on a contract or term basis.

**BACKGROUND OF THE PRESENT INVENTION**

10           One of the many impacts of the e-Commerce revolution is that virtually every company is now being forced to remain at the cutting edge of innovation. Being at the cutting edge usually requires professional skill, expertise, and experience that is not "on the payroll." Companies are trying to hire the skills they need any way they can and are turning to contract arrangements in unprecedented numbers, in part because  
15 they cannot find the required talent on a permanent hire basis. Currently, companies have four main sources from which to draw or hire contract professionals; however, each of these alternatives has its own drawbacks and limitations.

          For example, companies can turn to national consulting firms as a first source. Such firms have quality people, but are extremely expensive – typically charging three  
20 to four times as much as their cost for each consultant plus travel expenses. In addition, national consulting firms generally are not even interested in contracts of less than several hundred thousand dollars.

          A second source of contract professionals are regional or niche consulting firms. Such firms generally specialize in either local geographies or specific industries on a  
25 regional basis. They tend not to have the same depth of resources as the national firms and their business processes are more manually intensive than the national firms. On the positive side, they charge slightly less than the national firms (two to three times their consultant costs) and usually have lower travel expenses.

          A third source of contract professionals are information/technology (I/T) staffing  
30 firms. Such firms essentially try to operate at higher volumes and lower margins than national, regional, or niche consulting firms and tend to focus on a particular area of specialty. Such firms recruit clients through traditional sales methods and then act as a matchmaker to attempt to find available professionals within their database that

appear to be the best candidates for whatever project you have described. The company that hires an I/T staffing firm does not have direct access to the firm's database of consultants, must rely on the match-making skills or whim of the staffing firm, and must go through the time-consuming process of scheduling interviews and  
5 follow-ups with potential professionals through the I/T staffing firm.

The fourth source of contract professionals, and the most recent development, is through Internet resume or job posting services, such as [www.jobs.com](http://www.jobs.com), [www.headhunter.net](http://www.headhunter.net), and [www.monster.com](http://www.monster.com). The major advantage to this type of service is the global access to the potential pool of candidates. The downside to these  
10 services have been the fact that such services have focused solely on creating the initial contact between the company and the potential contract professional and must rely primarily on candidates sending e-mails and resumes to the job poster. The sheer volume of e-mails, the frustration of dealing with misrepresentation, and the lack of any screening and validation process have offset the good aspects of electronic  
15 recruiting. In addition, Internet resume and job posting sites usually focus primarily upon placing permanent hires, as opposed to contract or term hires.

Thus, there is a need to use the unique capabilities of the Internet to create a new, much more efficient, and innovative marketplace and business model for placing qualified professionals into client projects on a contract or term basis. In addition,  
20 there is a need to empower professionals to choose when and where they work, with any caveats important to them, and at rates they are free to choose.

There is a need for a computer network system in which professionals have the ability to register their skills and credentials in a comprehensive and standardized  
25 manner.

There is a need for a computer network system in which professionals can have their skills and credentials independently certified and verified.

There is a need for a computer network system by which professionals can evaluate their market rate and determine what skills and experiences will increase their market rate.

30 There is a need for a computer network system by which clients can determine what the labor costs will be for a particular project based on the market rate for professionals having the skills and experiences necessary for completing the project.

There is a need for a computer network system in which clients have the ability to post projects with specified certification levels, skills, and credentials matching the same standardized criteria used by professionals to describe themselves, and only to receive e-mails and bids from professionals in compliance with those criteria.

5           There is a further need for a computer network system in which clients only receive bids for projects from professionals that qualify for the project, that are available to work during the term of the project, that are interested in the project and project location, and that have specified a certain rate per hour for which they are willing to work on the project.

10           There is a need for a computer network system in which professionals, once registered, can view posted jobs meeting any specified criteria or specifically matching their skills, certification, and areas of interest.

          There is also a need for a computer network system in which professionals can "bid" on a posted job for which they qualify and further to specify any caveats, special  
15 conditions, and hourly rate they are willing to accept.

          There is a need for a computer network system in which clients can review bids from professionals that satisfy the criteria specified for that job, send e-mails directly to the professional asking clarifying or qualifying questions, and request a follow-up in-person or video interview.

20           There is a need for a computer network system in which professionals and clients can communicate during the bidding process on a totally confidential basis.

          There is a need for a computer network system in which clients can make a counter offer via e-mail, essentially offering the position but at a lower rate or with other conditions.

25           There is a need for a computer network system in which, once a professional accepts an offer from a client, all other bids are automatically stopped to avoid cluttering of the client's mailbox, and all other projects upon which the professional has bid and which have overlapping start and stop dates are notified that they are withdrawn as a potential candidate.

30           There is a further need for a computer network system in which master contracts have already been entered by the professionals and the clients prior to initiation of the bidding process and which are modified only by the specific terms of an accepted offer.

There is a need for a computer network system in which time and expense sheets are submitted by the professional to the client on a periodic basis through the computer network system, in which invoices are sent from the client to the professional on a periodic basis through the computer network system, and in which user fees are charged as a percentage of each invoice payment made through the computer network system, as opposed to an "up-front fee" charged to either the professional or the client.

### **BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION**

Briefly described, the present invention includes a computerized method for obtaining a bid from a professional for a project of a client, comprising the steps of maintaining a database of projects of clients, each project having a description and values specified by a client for a first set of predefined criteria, allowing a professional to access the database of projects to review the project descriptions, receiving a bid from the professional for a particular project, the professional having associated therewith a profile including specified values for a second set of predefined criteria, comparing the specified values of the professional with the specified values of the particular project, and forwarding the bid from the professional to the client of the particular project as a function of said comparison.

More specifically, the first and second sets of predefined criteria include role experience, industry experience, skills, and certifications for the project. The method further comprises the steps of allowing the professional to specify values for the second set of predefined criteria, and generating a profile for the professional incorporating the specified values for the second set of predefined criteria. The method also includes the step of maintaining a database of profiles of professionals.

Further, the method includes the steps of receiving a profile from a professional, performing a quality analysis of the profile by manually reviewing the profile for inconsistencies and obvious errors, and adding the profile to the database of profiles of professionals as a function of the manual review. The step of performing a quality analysis includes performing a background check on the professional to verify the profile. The step of conducting a background check on the professional includes validating academic credentials, references, skills, and years of experience of the professional.

The method also comprises the step of assigning a screening level to the profile of the professional as a function of years of experience of the professional, number of projects of clients completed by the professional, and period of time for which the profile of the professional has been maintained in the database without receipt of a negative comment by a client regarding the professional. For each project that includes a required screening level specified by the client, the method further comprises the step of comparing the screening level of the professional with the required screening level of the project, and the bid is forwarded to the client if the specified values and screening level of the professional respectively match the specified values and screening level of the particular project.

The method further includes allowing the professional to review the specified values of a project for the first set of predefined criteria. It also includes the step of enabling a search of the database of projects according to the descriptions of the projects or according to the respective specified values of the projects for the first set of predefined criteria. When a bid is forwarded to a client, a link to the profile of the professional from which the bid is received is also forwarded.

The step of forwarding the bid further comprises forwarding the bid to the client if the specified values of the professional respectively match the specified values of the particular project or if the specified values of the professional match a predetermined subset of the specified values of the particular project. Additionally, the method includes the step of returning the bid to the professional as a function of said comparison. Such function includes notifying the professional that the specified values of the professional do not match the specified values of the particular project or notifying the professional that he does not qualify for the particular project.

The method further comprises the step of maintaining anonymity of the professional from whom the bid is received when a bid is forwarded to the client.

The method also includes the steps of receiving an offer from the client of the particular project and forwarding the offer to the professional from whom the bid is received. In addition, the method includes the steps of receiving information regarding whether the offer is accepted by the professional and forwarding the information to the client of the particular project. Further, the method includes the steps of receiving a request for additional information from the client of the particular project and forwarding the request to the professional from which the bid is received and the steps

of receiving a request for an interview from the client of the particular project and forwarding the request to the professional from which the bid is received. Additionally, the method includes the step of relaying a video conference between the professional from whom the bid is received and the client of the particular project.

5           The specified values of the professional also include availability dates on which the professional is available to work and the specified values of the particular project include project dates during which work must be performed on the particular project. Correspondingly, the step of forwarding the bid comprises forwarding the bid to the client if the availability dates match the project dates.

10           The present invention also includes a computerized method for providing information regarding a particular project to a professional to facilitate bidding on the project by the professional, comprising the steps of maintaining a database of projects for clients, each project having a description specified by a client, allowing a professional to access the database of projects to review the descriptions, receiving a  
15           request for additional information for a particular project from the professional, forwarding the request for additional information to the client of the particular project, and maintaining the anonymity of the professional when forwarding the request for additional information to the client.

          The method further includes the steps of receiving a response to the request for  
20           additional information from the client and forwarding the response to the professional.

          In addition, each project further comprises values defined by the respective client for a first predefined set of criteria and the method includes maintaining a database of profiles for professionals, each profile including specified values for a second predefined set of criteria.

25           The method further includes the step of comparing the specified values for the second set of criteria of the professional requesting additional information for a particular project with the specified values for the first set of criteria for the particular project, and the step of forwarding the request for additional information to the client of the particular project is selectively performed based on the results of said  
30           comparison. The method also includes the step of notifying the professional that the professional does not qualify for the particular project if the request for additional information is not forwarded based on said comparison.

The method also includes the step of comparing a predetermined subset of the specified values for the second set of criteria of the professional requesting additional information for a particular project with a predetermined subset of the specified values for the first set of criteria for the particular project and the of forwarding the request  
5 for additional information to the client of the particular project is selectively performed based on the results said comparison. The method also includes notifying the professional that the professional does not qualify for the particular project if the request for additional information is not forwarded based on the comparison.

The present invention also includes a method for selectively identifying profiles  
10 of professionals maintained in a database and used in screening professionals when bidding on projects of clients, comprising the steps of receiving a profile from a professional, performing a background check on the professional to verify the profile, and assigning a screening level to the profile as a function of years of experience of the professional if the profile is verified.

15 The step of conducting a background check on the professional includes validating academic credentials, references, skills, and years of experience of the professional.

The method further comprises the steps of obtaining comments from each client for which the professional completes a project and assigning a screening level to the  
20 profile as a function of number of projects completed by the professional without receipt of a negative comment by a client regarding the professional. Additionally, the method further includes the steps of obtaining comments from each client for which the professional works on a project and assigning a screening level to the profile as a function of time for which the profile of the professional has been maintained in the  
25 database without receipt of a negative comment by a client regarding the professional.

### **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

For a more complete understanding of the present invention, reference should now be had to the accompanying drawings wherein:

30 Fig. 1 is a block diagram illustrating the configuration of a computerized network system for facilitating the hiring of qualified professionals for specific projects according to the present invention.;

Fig. 2 is a block diagram illustrating the internet information server of the computerized system of Fig. 1;



Fig. 3 is a block diagram of a user computer of the computerized system of Fig. 1;

Fig. 4 is a block diagram illustrating general options available to users accessing the computerized system of Fig. 1;

5 Fig. 5 is a block diagram illustrating the registration process for a professional using the computerized system of Fig. 1;

Fig. 6 is a block diagram illustrating the registration process for a client using the computerized system of Fig. 1;

10 Fig. 7 is a block diagram illustrating the process for creating and posting a new project on the computerized system of Fig. 1;

Fig. 8 is a block diagrams illustrating the process for searching, reviewing, and bidding on projects posted on the computerized system of Fig. 1;

Fig. 9 is a block diagram illustrating the process of engagement management of a project performed using the computerized system of Fig. 1; and

15 Fig. 10 is a block diagram illustrating the process of issuing a change order request for an active project using the computerized system of Fig. 1.

#### **DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS**

The present invention is directed primarily to an Internet-based business-to-business marketplace in which companies or individuals (alternatively called "clients") can post projects for which they would like to hire a professional on a contract or term basis. In the preferred embodiment, the web-based marketplace of the present invention is directed to the hiring and project engagement management of business consulting and I/T professionals; however, it should be understood that the term "professionals" could also include any type of employee, independent contractor, vendor, consultant, accountant, attorney, banker, or any other white-collar or blue-collar laborer, who can provide services on an hourly or fixed-fee basis.

Since the preferred embodiment of the present invention is directed to a web-based or Internet-based marketplace, the system architecture for such a business is described first with reference to Figs. 1 through 3.

30 Referring now to Fig. 1, a computerized network system 20 by which clients can hire and manage professionals for particular projects on a contract or term basis according to the present invention is shown. The system 20 includes an internet information server 100, a plurality of user computers used by professionals 300, and a

plurality of user computers used by clients 301, all of which are interconnected by a communications network 200. For clarity, the computerized system 20 depicted in Fig. 1 shows only a single internet information server, several professional computers 300, and several client computers 301. In actual practice, however, a multiplicity of professional and client computers can be interconnected by the network 200 to the internet information server 100 and, if desired, the functions of the internet information server described herein may be performed by several different computers/servers operated by a system administrator. Indeed, the advantages obtained by the present invention are maximized if the system is used by a large number of clients posting projects for bid and by a large number of professionals willing to bid and be hired on a contract or term basis.

The professional and client computers 300, 301, respectively, are each connected to the internet information server via network interfaces 304, 305, and 130, respectively, to the network 200. In a preferred embodiment, the internet information server 100 is a worldwide web server machine (or "server") and the network 200 is a distributed public network, such as the Internet. The professional and client computers and the internet information server may be connected to the network 200 using a public switch phone network, such as those provided by local or regional telephone operating companies, or using dedicated data lines, cellular communication systems, satellite networks, cable television networks, or any other suitable connection means. Professional and client computers and the internet information server may also be connected to the network 200 via an Internet Service Provider.

As shown in Fig. 2, the internet information server 100 includes a central processing unit (CPU) 105, random access memory (RAM) 110, read only memory (ROM) 115, a clock 120, an operating system 125, a data storage device 160, and a network interface 130. The internet information server 100 also includes a searching processor 135, a calculating processor 140, a communications processor 145, a reporting processor 150, and an accounting processor 155. The internet information server 100 may be a conventional personal computer, a server, or a computer workstation having sufficient processing ability and memory. In a preferred embodiment, the internet information server 100 acts as a worldwide web server, receiving and transmitting data to and from system users via the worldwide web or Internet. The internet information server 100 must have the ability to accommodate

high volume transaction processing as well as the ability to perform a large number of mathematical calculations and to accommodate large database searches. If the computerized network system grows large, the internet information server 100 may include additional processors, servers, and databases necessary to efficiently  
5 accommodate the number of authorized users and the size of the databases used in this computerized network system.

The CPU 105 and other processors 135, 140, 145, 150, and 155 may be conventional computer microprocessors, such as the Intel Pentium manufactured by Intel Corporation or other microprocessors manufactured by other companies.

10 Alternatively, some or all of the functions performed by the processors 135, 140, 145, 150, and 155 may be performed by the CPU 105.

Conventional network operating systems, such as Windows NT, UNIX, or other similar operating systems, could be used as the operating system 125 in the internet information server 100. The network interface 130 of the internet information server  
15 100 may include a conventional internal or external modem and may also include routers, load sharing devices, hubs, and firewall devices, all of which are conventional and known to those skilled in the art. In the preferred embodiment, the internet information server 100 includes software supporting the hosting of a worldwide web site. In addition, the network interface 130 is connected to the Internet via an online  
20 service provider or via a dedicated data communication line provided by telephone companies such as a T1 or T3 line. The internet information server 100 may also include conventional web software, such as Netscape Navigator manufactured by Netscape Corporation or Internet Explorer by Microsoft Corporation.

The data storage device 160 may include magnetic storage devices commonly  
25 referred to as "hard drives," CD-ROM storage devices, flash memory devices, optical storage devices, magnetic tape storage devices, or volatile semiconductor memory devices, or a combination of the aforesaid mentioned items. The data storage device 160 includes databases necessary for processing the various transactions and communications between professionals and clients according to the present invention  
30 and as will be discussed in greater detail hereinafter. A database management system, such as those produced by Oracle Corporation, may be used in developing and managing the databases in the internet information server 100.

A raid controller 196 is interposed between the database storage device 160 and the CPU 105. The raid controller 196 performs several data management functions that provide multiple redundancies within the data storage device 160 to protect data from being corrupted or lost if a portion of the data storage device fails or becomes corrupted.

The registered professionals database 165 includes a master list of profiles for all professionals who have registered to participate in the computerized system 20. The database includes all pertinent biographical information, such as name, address, phone number, e-mail address, bank account information, ID number and password. The database also includes standardized resume-type information, such as academic record, degrees, employment history, as well as standardized skills, experience, proficiencies, ratings, and certification information. The database also includes all personal e-mails, reports, and correspondence sent to and from each professional within the computerized system 20. Further, the database includes information about projects on which each professional has worked or is currently working, and for which bids are currently outstanding. In addition, the database includes a verification that each professional has read and agreed to the terms of the master contract and to the terms of each project-specific addendum to the master contract.

The registered clients database 170 includes a master list of profiles of all clients who have registered to participate in the computerized system 20. Clients in the database 170 are divided into two groups: end users, who actually hire professionals for their own projects, and value-added re-marketers, who hire professionals for projects of their own clients. The database includes all pertinent company information, such as company name, address, company contact(s), phone number(s), and e-mail address(es), ID number and password. The database includes all pertinent information, including separate ID numbers and passwords, for each hiring manager authorized by the company contact to post projects in the computerized system 20. The database also includes ratings that have been submitted by professionals for each client. In addition, the database includes a verification that each client, through an authorized representative, has read and agreed to the terms of the master contract and to the terms of each project-specific addendum to the master contract.

The open projects database 175 includes a master list of every project posted on the computerized system 20 for jobs that are not currently filled and/or are

currently open for bids. Relevant information for each project includes, among other things, a general description of the project, location, and other relevant information about the specific requirements, perks, and needs associated with the project, such as whether on-site work is required, start and stop dates, target hours for project  
5 completion, and required criteria that a professional bidding for the project must or ideally will satisfy. The database also includes all e-mails and other correspondence, such as bids, offers, rejections, and acceptances, related to each open project.

The active projects database 180 includes a master list of every project that has been filled through the computerized system 20 and on which a professional is  
10 currently working. This database includes all of the information accumulated when the project was stored in the open projects database 175 and further includes all e-mails and correspondence, such as the terms of the addendum to the master contract, weekly timesheets, status reports, and expense reports, change order requests, and invoices.

15 The applications database 185 includes the various software applications and data used by various software applications in the internet information server 100 to operate and manage the computerized system 20.

The archived projects database 190 includes a master list of each project that has been completed and processed through the computerized system 20, from the  
20 time it is initially opened until it has been successfully closed.

The prospective professionals database 192 includes a master list of professionals who have been identified or expressed an interest in being hired through the computerized system 20 but who have not yet become registered. The amount of available information for each prospective professional will vary.

25 Correspondingly, the prospective clients database 194 includes a master list of clients and companies which have been identified or expressed an interest in posting jobs or projects on the computerized system 20, but which have not yet registered. Obviously, the amount of data accumulated for each prospective client will also vary.

The internet information server 100 also includes an administrator interface 195,  
30 which may include a keyboard, mouse, video monitor, scanner, voice recognition system, printer, or other system commonly used to facilitate data exchange between a computer user, such as the system administrator, and a computer, such as the internet information server 100.

A standard computer set-up is illustrated in Fig. 3. Although the computer set-up is specifically described as one for the professional computer 300, the set-up would apply equally as well for a client computer 301. The professional computer 300 includes a network interface 304, a user interface 310, a CPU 320, RAM 325, ROM 330, a clock 335, and a data storage device 340. A conventional personal computer or a computer workstation having sufficient memory and processing ability may be used as the user computer 300. The network interface 304 facilitates data transmission between the user computer 300 and the network 200. In a preferred embodiment, the network 200 is a public distributed network system such as the Internet and the professional computer 300 includes suitable Internet browser software, such as Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer, that is capable of interpreting information generated by the internet information server 100 and displaying such information on a video monitor associated with the professional computer 300. The network interface 304 may be an internal or external modem and may be connected directly to the network or Internet using a direct communication line or a high band width communication line, such as T1 or T3 line, or the network interface 304 may be connected to the Internet via an Internet Service Provider. The CPU 320 of the professional computer 300 may include a conventional microprocessor, such as an Intel Pentium processor or other similar microprocessor commonly used in personal computers or workstations. The data storage device 340 may include magnetic "hard disk" devices, CD-ROM devices, volatile semiconductor memory, flash memory, optical storage unit, magnetic tape storage units, or similar storage devices. Data exchange between the computer user and the professional computer 300 is facilitated by the user interface 310, which may include a keyboard, mouse, scanner, printer, voice recognition equipment, video monitor, or other similar devices commonly used to exchange data between a user and a personal computer.

Together, the computers 300, 301, network 200, and internet information server 100 are used by professionals and clients to facilitate the hiring and engagement management of professionals for clients' particular projects on a term or contract basis using the internet business-to-business marketplace, methods, and processes described hereinafter.

Having discussed the system architecture of the computerized system 20, the methods and processes used by the computerized system for facilitating the hiring and

engagement management of qualified professionals for particular projects will now be discussed in greater detail. When a professional or client accesses the computerized system 20 via the network 200, the internet information server 100 generates a main web page 400 that is viewed by the professional or client on their video monitor through their network interfaces 304, 305, respectively. As shown in block diagram in Fig. 4, once the professional and client ("users") have accessed the main web page 400 of the computerized system 20, users are presented with a number of options or additional pages to which they can link. For example, users can initiate the registration process for a professional 402 or initiate the registration process for a client 450. Once a professional or client has registered and been issued a system ID and password, professionals can log into and clients can log into 500, 600, respectively, the internet information server 100.

The various methods and processes that are available to professionals and clients and that are performed by the computerized network system 20 will now be described in greater detail with reference to Figs. 5 through 10.

As shown in Fig. 5, a professional can initiate 402 the registration process with the internet information server 100. Becoming registered will enable the professional to access and participate in the internet marketplace of the present invention. Once the registration process is initiated, the professional is prompted by the internet information server 100 to input relevant information into a number of data fields. Some of the data fields are optional; however, a number of the data fields require that information be submitted before the registrant will be allowed to proceed with the registration process. As a convenience, registrants have the capability of saving their information and returning at a later time to complete the registration process.

First, registrants are prompted 404 to enter general information about themselves into a series of standardized data fields. Such information includes name, address, preferred mailing address, phone number(s), fax number(s), e-mail address, social security number, and emergency contact information.

Registrant are then prompted 406 to specify the level of quality and screening for which they both qualify and would like to pay. Four screening levels are available in the preferred embodiment; however, during the initial registration process, a professional will only potentially qualify for three of the four levels. The minimum screening level is called "Bronze," which requires no minimum number of years of

experience, no background check, and no additional cost to professionals. Professional requesting "Bronze" level screening will have all of their registration information, once submitted, quickly reviewed by the internet information server 100 and one of the system administrators, such as a certification manager, to verify that there are no  
5 obvious inconsistencies, errors, or questionable information provided. To obtain a "Silver" level screening, professionals must have at least 2 years of professional experience and pay for a background check. A background check can be requested by the internet information server 100 and readily obtained electronically from any of a number of third party providers and in a manner known to those skilled in the art.  
10 Generally, a background check will be able to verify the academic credentials, business and personal references, basic skills, and years of experience of professionals. To obtain a "Gold" level screening, professionals must have at least 6 years of professional experience and pay for a background check. A "Platinum" level screening cannot be requested by registrants, but, as discussed in greater detail herein, is automatically  
15 assigned 852 by the internet information server 100 to professionals having a "Gold" screening level after satisfactory completion of three projects or nine contiguous months of projects within the computerized network system 20. Satisfactory completion means no negative comments were received from the client of the project(s) on which the professional worked.

20 If registrants request "Gold" or "Silver" screening levels 406, then they are required to electronically "sign" 408 an authorization and release for a background check to be performed, and provide credit card, birth date, addresses for the past 7 years, previous 2 employers, and an indication of whether or not they have a security clearance.

25 During the next few steps, registrants are asked to provide information about their professional experience and skills. One of the main advantages of the present invention is the fact that the list of experiences and skills from which professionals select is the same standardized list from which clients will select to identify those criteria professionals must or ought to have to qualify for bidding and working on the  
30 project.

First, registrants are asked to provide a summary of their "role" experience 410, in other words, what types of positions they have held and the length of time in each position. For example, registrants input the number of years they have been an



executive, line manager, people manager, program manager, project manager, web project manager, consultant, subject matter expert, and technical specialist.

Next, registrants are asked to provide a summary of their "industry" experience 412. More specifically, the registrant inputs the number of years he has worked in 5 different industries, such as financial services, manufacturing, distribution, retail, communications/media, travel/hospitality, health care, government, utility, real estate development, and the like. Before proceeding, the internet information server 100 verifies that the number of years of role experience matches the number of years of industry experience entered by the professional.

10 Registrants are next prompted to create a detailed skills profile 414. The detailed skills profile is divided into two segments, (i) business consulting skills 416 and (ii) technology consulting skills 418 and products 420, either or both of which may be completed by registrants, as applicable.

Registrants may identify their business consulting skills 418 by selecting from a 15 standardized list those experiences on which they have worked or led an activity and the number of years for each. For convenience, these experiences are divided into several categories: strategies, requirements/analysis, and business process design/management. Under the "strategies" heading, registrants can select from a list that includes experiences such as business/opportunity strategy, 20 marketing/communications strategy, product/development strategy, delivery/operations strategy, organizational change strategy, financial strategy, and mergers and acquisitions, and the like. Under the "requirements/analysis" heading, registrants can select experiences such as customer requirements, business requirements, information requirements, market opportunity analysis, competitive 25 analysis, business case developments, best practice research, and the like. Finally, registrants can select such experiences as process mapping/workflow design, business process design/improvement, management process/organizational design, information/knowledge management, communications/marketing approach, creative design/communications, sales, financial resource management, risk 30 management/compliance, quality, efficiency, or the like, which appear under the "business process design/management" heading. Before proceeding, registrants are then asked to rank their top five skills in order from all of the skills previously selected.

Registrants are also given the opportunity to identify their technology consulting experience 418, if any. As with the business consulting selection process, the technology consulting experiences are divided for convenience into the following categories: information systems (IS) management practices, enterprise technology architecture, design, development/testing, deployment, and operations/support. Within each technology consulting experience category, registrants specifically indicate whether they have experience with one or more of a plurality of sub-categorized experiences. For example, IS management practices include such sub-categories as IS strategy and planning, life cycle management, testing methodology, and process management, to name a few. Enterprise technology architecture includes such sub-categories as applications architecture, network architecture, systems architecture, security architecture, and user interface design. Design may include such sub-categories as network design, graphics design, front-end design, and infrastructure design. Development/testing may include such sub-categories as web development, legacy system programming/languages, systems integration, and writing/document management. Deployment may include sub-categories such as site preparation, training, and installation management. Operations/support may include sub-categories such as application maintenance, security operations, network operations, asset/vendor management, and end user operations/support. Finally, registrants are then asked to allocate their years of technology experience between the following types of technology areas: mainframe, midrange, client/server, and web/internet.

With regard to technology products, registrants are asked to indicate on which technology products and tools they have been formally trained or are experienced users 420. For ease of reference, the various technology products and tools may be categorized into the following: web development, database management, transaction systems, platform, operating systems, application programming, file management, systems/network management, network, testing, storage management, security, performance/capacity management, change management, graphics design, help desk, inventory/asset management, project management, and operations. In addition, because technology products and tools, such as software applications, are constantly being updated, changed, and created, the specific technology products and tools identified within each category will evolve over time.

Registrants are then given an opportunity 422 to specify the application software packages, if any, on which they have been formally trained or with which they have substantial experience. Registrants would have the opportunity to select from a finite list of options, such as Security First, PeopleSoft, SAP, and the like, or insert an  
5 application software package not listed.

Next, registrants are given the opportunity 424 to identify each of the professional certifications, if any, which they have been awarded or obtained. These would include vendor certifications, such as those provided by software vendors like Microsoft, Lotus, or Novell, and professional organization certifications, such as a CPA  
10 or ISO 9000.

Registrants are then asked to provide some additional biographical information 426, such as professional references, character references, education and degrees awarded, professional affiliates, and work experience.

Next, registrants are asked to provide bank account information 428 that will enable them to receive direct deposits electronically after they have begun working on  
15 a project obtained through the computerized network system 20. Alternatively, registrants can elect to receive payments by check through the mail.

Finally, registrants are required to read and sign a master agreement 430, which will apply to all of their activities through the computerized network system 20 and  
20 which will govern their working relationship with clients once they begin working on projects obtained through the system. Alternatively, professionals can electronically sign the master agreement or print off and sign a hard copy of the master agreement and mail the hard copy to the system administrator. Among other things, the master agreement prohibits professionals from including any personally-identifying information  
25 in any correspondence with clients on the system for reasons that are discussed herein. After reviewing and revising any information provided in the registration materials, professionals can then submit their registrations to the internet information server 100 for processing.

Once registrations are submitted 432 to the internet information server 100, all  
30 of the data is quickly reviewed 434 by one of the system administrators, such as the certification manager, to verify that there are no obvious inconsistencies, errors, or questionable information submitted. If there are any problems, registrants will receive an e-mail or phone call requesting additional information or clarification. Once all

questions have been resolved, including receipt of a signed master agreement in electronic or hard-copy format, and for registrants that have merely requested "Bronze" screening level, the internet information server 100 will issue to the professionals user IDs and passwords that will enable them to access and use the system 436.

For registrants who have requested "Silver" or "Gold" screening level, background checks are initiated 438 by the internet information server 100 as discussed previously. Once the results of the background checks are received, the professionals' profiles are verified, and any other questions are resolved, including receipt of a signed master agreement in electronic or hard-copy format, the internet information server 100 updates the professional's profile to indicate whether the professional has attained a "Silver" or "Gold" screening level. Professionals then receive user IDs and passwords 440.

If, at any stage, the administrators detect or determine that professionals have committed any fraud or attempt to mislead or misrepresent themselves, they will either not receive or will lose their IDs and passwords and will not be allowed to participate within the system.

The process by which clients are initially registered 450 is much less time-consuming than the process for registering professionals. The reason for this is because the client representative does not have to input skills and experiences when registering – such information is only required when a particular project is posted on the system, as will be discussed in greater detail herein.

Once the client registration process is begun 450, the client representative is required to submit general information 452 about the client, such as company name, address, phone number(s), fax number(s), and stock symbol, if any. The client representative is also required to identify the authorized client contact or administrator for interacting with the internet information server 100 and the address, phone number(s), fax number(s), and e-mail address of the client contact. The client representative can also specify, if applicable, the name, address, and contact information for each business unit and hiring manager authorized to post projects on behalf of the client.

Next, the client can specify 454 a standardized expense reimbursement policy to be used by the client for all projects. The client is prompted to input a specific dollar

amount above which receipts will be required from professionals, whether the client wants the system administrator to receive and review receipts or, if the client wants to review receipts, the person or department who will receive the receipts, and whether there are any other special provisions or general limitations on reimbursable spending  
5 related to projects posted by the client.

Next, the authorized client representative is required to read and sign a master agreement 456, which will apply to all of the client's activities through the computerized network system and which will govern the client's working relationship with each professional that works on one of the client's projects obtained through the  
10 system. Preferably, the client will be required to print off and sign a hard copy of the master agreement and mail the hard copy to the system administrators; however, the master agreement could also be read and signed electronically.

Once the general information and master agreement have been submitted 458 to the internet information server 100, one of the system administrators, such as a client relationship manager, reviews the registration materials and conducts follow-up  
15 correspondence with and research on the client, if necessary, to verify that the client will be able to pay professionals for projects and to verify that the client contact has the necessary authority to bind the client to the master agreement 460. Once the client's information and authority have been verified and a signed master agreement  
20 received, the client is given a user ID and password 462 for accessing the system.

Using the user ID and password, a client is able to log into the system 600. Once logged in, clients have a number of options available. They can update or revise the client registration information 602, including the addition or removal of new hiring managers with authority to post projects on behalf of the client, generate and view an  
25 availability query 604 or a rate query 606, request and view any professional's current rating 608, review the client's own satisfaction ratings 610, which are submitted by professionals during and after completion of projects, create and post a new project that will be searchable and open for bidding by registered professional 612, or search and review all or a portion of all open projects currently posted by the client 614.

30 The primary feature of the present invention for a client is the ability of the client or hiring manager for the client to be able to create and post a new project 612 on the system for viewing and potential bidding by professionals. The process for

defining a new project is quite similar to the process professionals must go through when generating their own profiles of skills and experiences.

When clients initiate the process for creating a new project 612, clients are first required to submit general information about the project 630. Such general  
5 information includes a project ID, name, purchase order number, location (such as city and state) where the project will be performed, what percentage of the project must be completed on-site, the project start date, the project end date, whether part-time work is allowed, total budgeted hours for the project, amount of travel required (local or otherwise), whether parking is provided, a written description of the project, and  
10 any additional or project-specific requirements that differ from the terms in the clients' master agreement.

Next, clients specify 632 what criteria a professional hired for the project must satisfy, such as screening level (Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum), and whether the professional must have a drug test, security clearance, or background check.

15 Next, clients are prompted 634 to provide information about the professional's experience and skills required by a professional who will work on the project. As stated previously, one of the main advantages of the present invention is the fact that the list of experiences and skills from which clients select for a given project are the same standardized list from which professionals will select to create their profile within the  
20 system. Thus, clients are prompted through numerous data fields and lists to select "role" experience, "industry" experience, detailed skills, including business consulting skills and technology consulting skills and products, application software packages, and professional certifications that are either required or "nice-to-have" for a particular project. Clients can also specify the number of years of experience a professional must  
25 have for any one or more of the specified skills and experiences. To assist clients in the preparation and selection of skills and experience criteria for a particular project, the internet information server 100 can also generate an "intelligent agent," also known as a "wizard," that can provide clients with short cuts and suggested selections of skills and experiences based on responses provided by clients to a series of  
30 questions designed to help clients define their projects and project needs.

Finally, clients can specify 636 the type of "filter" to be used by the internet information server 100 for accepting or rejecting bids. In other words, clients can specify whether they will accept bids on a particular project from any professional, only

from professionals satisfying all of the required criteria, or from professionals matching some of the criteria. Clients can also specify 638 the type of filter to be used for receiving clarifying e-mails from professionals for the same project. The filter used for accepting bids does not have to be the same one used for accepting clarifying e-mails.

5           Once all of this information is submitted to the internet information server 100, a new project is posted 640 on the "open" projects database where it can be searched, reviewed, queried, and bid upon by registered professionals. The specific bidding process will be described herein.

10           Alternatively, clients having a particular professional to whom they would like to extend an offer immediately upon the creation of a new project have the "fast-track" option of creating the project and immediately extending an offer 642 to a particular professional. With the fast-track option, the project is not posted for generally bidding by all registered professional. Once such an offer is extended 642, the process by which professionals responds to the offer is the same as professionals would respond  
15 to any offer received in response to a bid as will be discussed herein (see steps 590 and following in Fig. 8).

          Using the same templates for skills and experiences that are used for the creation of a new project, clients can generate and view an availability query 604 or a rate query 606. An availability query 604 allows clients to view a selected portion of  
20 the database of profiles of professionals to determine how many professionals satisfy a particular set of skills and experience criteria. Such data can be viewed and organized in many different manners. For example, clients can see how many professionals satisfy the specified criteria by region, state, or country, and clients can determine the number of professionals who satisfy the specified criteria who are currently available or  
25 available for a specified time period. Using such data, clients could also determine the optimal location for placing a particular project or project team based on availability of professionals with the necessary skills.

          On the other hand, because the internet information server 100 can accumulate and maintain such data, a rate query 608 provides clients with the ability to determine  
30 average rates paid to professionals within the system having a particular set of skills and experience, by city, region, or country, and over the last 30, 90, or 365 days. This capability helps clients know what the market price is, helps them figure out what the

cost delta is between specifying a particular skill or experience as "required" or merely "nice-to-have," and enables them to estimate a budget for a particular project.

A client is also able to request and view any professional's current rating 608, if the client has an ID number for a particular professional. When viewing any profiles of professional on the internet information server 100, a client is only able to view non-identifying information, which maintains the anonymity and confidentiality of each professional's information. Because of the unique qualities and matching process facilitated by the present invention, it is unlikely that clients will ever be inclined to view the profile of professionals who have not already submitted bids for one of their projects.

Using user IDs and passwords, professionals are also able to log into the system 500. Once logged in, professionals have a number of options available to them. They can update or revise their registration information 502, generate and view a need query 504 or a rate query 506, request and view any client's current rating 508, review their own satisfaction ratings 510, which are submitted by clients during and after completion of projects, and search all open projects 512, using any of a variety of criteria to focus or narrow the search.

As stated previously, because of the unique qualities and matching process facilitated by the present invention, it is unlikely that professionals will ever be inclined to view the satisfaction ratings of clients 508 unless they are specifically interested in bidding on a particular project.

Using the same templates for skills and experiences that professionals used to create their own profiles, professionals can generate and view a need query 504 or a rate query 506. A need query 504 allows professionals to view a select portion of the database of open projects to determine how many open projects need a particular set of skills and experience criteria. Such data can be viewed and organized in many different manners. For example, professionals can see how many open projects satisfy the specified criteria by region, state, or country, professionals can view such open projects one by one, professionals can determine the number of open projects that satisfy the specified criteria which are currently available or available for a specified time period. Using such data, professionals could also determine what parts of the country need professionals having specified skills and experience, such as their own.



On the other hand, because the internet information server 100 can accumulate and maintain such data, a rate query 506 provides professionals with the ability to determine average rates paid to professionals within the system having a particular set of skills and experience, by city, region, or country, and over the last 30, 90, or 365  
5 days. This capability helps professionals know what their market rates are or can be and helps them with career planning by showing them what skills or experiences are most in demand and can most effectively allow them to increase their hourly rate.

Before actually bidding on a project, it is more likely that professionals will search the database of projects for those that are of interest and which need  
10 professional having their skills and experience. In the same way professionals would run a need or rate query 504, 506, respectively, professionals can also generate and run an open project search 512, using any combination of criteria desired or only those criteria for which they qualify. For example, professionals can specify project location  
15 (such as city and state), what percentage of the project must be completed on-site, the project start and end dates, whether part-time work is allowed, total budgeted hours for the project, amount of travel required (local or otherwise), whether parking must be provided, specified screening level (Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum), and whether professionals must have a drug test, security clearance, or background check. Professionals could also specify their the experience and skills required by a  
20 professional who will work on the project, using the same templates they used to create their own profile and used by the client to create the project.

Once a search is run, the internet information server 100 displays a summary list of all open projects that satisfy the criteria specified by the professionals 520. From this summary list, professionals can select 522 one or more of the retrieved open  
25 projects to view additional detail regarding the selected project 524, can generate and submit an e-mail to the client of the selected project to request additional or clarifying information about the project 526, or prepare and submit a bid on the selected project 528.

Viewing additional detail of a selected project 524 allows professionals to view  
30 all the specified criteria and data fields entered by the client for the project. If desired, professionals can choose to prepare and submit an e-mail requesting additional or clarifying information about a selected project 526. Once prepared, the clarification e-mail is actually submitted 540 to the internet information server 100. The internet

information server 100 then compares 542 the criteria in the professional's profile with the criteria specified in the client's filter for that project. If the professional's profile satisfies the filter criteria, then the clarifying e-mail is forwarded 544 to the client's inbox for that particular project. Because the e-mail from the professional only  
5 identifies the professional's user ID number (and not name) and because the professional is prohibited from including personally-identifying information within the body of the e-mail, the professional's anonymity and confidentiality is maintained.

If the professional's profile does not satisfy the filter criteria, then the clarifying e-mail is returned 546 to the professional's system inbox with an explanation that the  
10 professional does not qualify for the project and that the client is only accepting clarifying e-mails from qualified professionals. If desired, the internet information server 100 can also specifically indicate what skills, experience, or other criteria the professional needed in order to qualify for the particular project.

The client for the specific project can then respond 548 to the clarifying e-mail  
15 with additional information regarding the specific project. The response e-mail is submitted 550 to the internet information server 100 and then forwarded 552 on to the professional who had requested the clarifying information.

The bidding process on a particular project is similar to the process for submission and response to a clarifying e-mail. Generally from the summary list, a  
20 professionals have the option of preparing a bid for submission to the client of a particular project 528. If professionals happens to know a specific project number, however, a bid can be prepared without first selecting the project from the summary list.

A bid will generally contain a rate per hour that professionals are willing to work  
25 on a particular project. Because all bids are submitted in anonymity, a professional has the flexibility to submit bids having different rates per hour for different projects for any reason. In the consulting industry, consultants do not have such flexibility because their industry rate per hour is generally known and bids cannot be submitted in anonymity. A bid can also contain any other stipulations, requirements, caveats, or  
30 special conditions that apply solely to the particular project upon which the professional has bid.

Once the bid has been prepared, the professional can save the bid for later submission 560 or immediately proceed to submit 562 the bid to the internet

information server 100 for forwarding to the client of the particular project. As with clarifying e-mails, the internet information server 100 receives the bid 564 and then compares the criteria in the professional's profile with the criteria specified in the client's filter for that project 566. If the professional's profile satisfies the filter criteria, then the bid is forwarded to the client's inbox for that particular project 568. As with clarifying e-mails, the professional's anonymity and confidentiality is maintained even when a bid is submitted.

If the professional's profile does not satisfy the filter criteria, then the bid is returned to the professional's system inbox with an explanation that the professional does not qualify for the project and that the client is only accepting bids from qualified professionals 570. If desired, the internet information server 100 can also specifically indicate what skills, experience, or other criteria the professional needed in order to qualify for the particular project.

The internet information server 100 also compares the professional's current commitments on active projects within the system to verify that the professional is available to work between the start and stop dates for the project upon which the professional is bidding 572. If the professional is already committed, then the bid is rejected and returned to the professional in a manner similar to that stated above 574.

In this manner, a client for a particular project can receive 576 one or more bids for a posted project from professionals who not only qualify for the project but who are available and interested in working on the project at a particular rate per hour. For convenience, such bids are placed within an inbox directly associated with the particular project with which they belong. When logged into the system, clients have the capability of reviewing 660 any and all of their open projects, ie. those which are posted and for which they are currently accepting bids.

With each bid received, clients can prepare and send back a clarification e-mail requesting additional information from the professional 578, clients can request an in-person or video interview 580, clients can organize, sort, and rank bids received for the particular project 582, clients can request that the internet information server 100 block all further bids or just bids from a particular professional(s) 584, clients can prepare and submit an offer in response to one or more of the bids 586, clients can do nothing and continue waiting for additional bids, or, in some cases, clients may withdraw an outstanding offer 588.

Any e-mail requests for additional information 578, requests for interview 580, or offers 586 are routed 590 through the internet information server 100 and forwarded 592 to the professional for review and response. Because of the importance of such communications, the internet information server 100 not only routes the  
5 correspondence from the client to the professional's inbox 592 maintained by the internet information server 100 (again still maintaining the anonymity of the professional), but also to the professional's external e-mail address 594 (unless the professional has specifically requested that such communications not be sent to his external e-mail address). If professionals respond to a client e-mail directly from their  
10 external e-mail address 596, the internet information server 100 receives the professionals' e-mail 598, deletes the external e-mail address 702, and inserts the non-identifying system user ID number in its place 704 (again, to maintain the professional's anonymity).

A request for clarification 578 from clients to professionals are handled in much  
15 the same way as clarifying e-mails from professionals to clients regarding a particular project.

Obviously, if clients request an interview 580 and professionals agree to be interviewed 710, the professional's anonymity will most likely be lost at that stage of the process.

20 Once clients decide upon a finalist from the bids received, clients prepare an offer for the particular project 586. An offer sheet is standardized within the system and requires clients to input a rate per hour, a start date, an end date, definition of the project, key deliverables, expense reimbursement provisions, and other terms or conditions specific to the particular project. Clients may agree upon the rate bid by  
25 professionals or indicate a commitment to hire at a different rate or with other specific conditions. For example, clients can offer lower rates but offer other perquisites, such as child care, parking, expense allowance, etc., that were not requested by professionals in their bids.

Professionals have three options when bids are received. Obviously,  
30 professionals could do nothing 710, in which case an offer will probably be withdrawn by the client after some reasonable period of time. More likely, however, professionals will either accept 712 or reject 714 the offer.

An acceptance 712 is an acceptance of the offer with the terms specified in the offer. A rejection 714 can be a rejection for any reason. In conjunction with a rejection, professionals can indicate 716 why they rejected the offer and what terms or offer to which they might have agreed. Thus, an "initial" rejection could in fact result  
5 in a new offer, with different terms and which the professional can then accept. This process could be repeated several times during an on-line negotiation.

Once professionals accept 712 an offer, the internet information server 100 sends an e-mail to the professionals explaining how to submit timesheets, status reports, and expense reports 720. Clients receive an e-mail from the internet  
10 information server 100 providing the professional's name and contact information 722. The e-mail also reminds clients to provide professionals with day 1 reporting instructions, directions, and to establish any necessary security arrangements. The open project is now converted to an "active" project and the accepted offer becomes an addendum to the master contract signed by both the client and the professional  
15 724.

In addition, upon acceptance, all other open projects for which professionals have bid and which have overlapping start and stop dates are immediately and automatically notified that the professionals have accepted an offer and that their bids are withdrawn 726. Further, all professionals who have bid on the now active project  
20 are immediately and automatically notified that the project has been filled 728. Such professionals can, if desired, find out whether their bid was above or below, and by what percentage range, from the accepted offer. Finally, the inbox for the now active project is closed to all incoming bids and requests for clarifications from other professionals 730.

At the completion of the first and each subsequent week's worth of work on an active project, professionals are required to submit weekly timesheets and status reports regarding their projects 800. Timesheets and status reports are automatically  
25 forwarded 802 to the client's in-box for the active project by the internet information server 100. Clients then have 48 hours to review the timesheets and status reports and raise any objections or issues related to them 804. Clients can address the situation via e-mail with professionals 806 and, if necessary, request that one of the system administrators, such as a "satisfaction manager," intermediate 808. Expense reports can be submitted at any time that expenses are incurred 810. An invoice is  
30

automatically generated 812 on a periodic basis, preferably twice a month, and submitted to the client for payment 814. A copy of the invoice is also sent to the professional 816. The invoice includes a request for payment based on the number of hours worked by the professional times the professional's agreed upon rate per hour for the particular project. The invoice can also include a request for expense reimbursement or an invoice for expenses can be generated and submitted separately.

Payments from clients are submitted electronically 818 to the internet information server 100. A specific portion or percentage of the paid invoice is deducted and added to the bank account of the system administrator 820. The remaining portion of the paid invoice amount is forwarded to the professional 822, either by check or by direct electronic deposit. Thus, rather than charging up-front fees for clients and professionals, the present invention merely charges a small percentage of fees collected on active projects.

During an active project, should the need arise, clients can submit 830 a change order request to change terms of the original agreement, such as stop date, budgeted hours, hourly rate, or the like. As with an original offer, professionals have the option of accepting 832 or rejecting 834 the requested change order. If accepted, the change order amends 836 the master agreement for both client and professional and takes effect as of the acceptance. If rejected, the project either continues 838 under the original offer and acceptance or the project is deemed terminated 840 by agreement of both client and professional.

Also, during an active project, both clients and professionals are asked to submit satisfaction reports 850, 860, respectively, to the internet information server 100 on the other party every three months and upon the completion of the project. Such satisfaction reports provide additional data on both professionals and clients that can be accessed and reviewed by other professionals and clients during the bidding process for subsequent or current open projects. Satisfaction reports allow clients and professionals to indicate whether their experience on the active project was positive, neutral, or negative. In addition, there is a free-form text box on the standardized satisfaction report that allows both clients and professionals to submit written comments. Written comments are only viewed by the particular client and professional and system administrator. Positive, neutral, and negative rating are available for

viewing by all registered professionals and by clients who have received bids from that professional.

As stated previously, a professional, when registering, cannot request a "Platinum" screening level. However, the internet information server 100 will automatically upgrade 852 a professional from "Gold" screening level to "Platinum" upon successful completion of three projects in the system with positive ratings or upon receipt of nine contiguous months of positive satisfaction ratings.

Finally, when the system is fully populated with clients and professionals, meaningful data can be obtained and manipulated within the various databases by the internet information server 100. Several different types of reports can be generated for clients and professionals as already previously mentioned; however, many other types of reports can also be generated. For example, the system can easily determine what areas of the country need professionals with certain skills, what areas of the country have too many professionals with the same or unneeded skills, what rates apply for what skills and in what parts of the country, what clients are prompt at paying invoices and which ones have high or low satisfaction ratings, and which professional have high satisfaction ratings and which one do not.

It will therefore be readily understood by those persons skilled in the art that the present invention is susceptible of broad utility and application. Many embodiments and adaptations of the present invention other than those herein described, as well as many variations, modifications and equivalent arrangements will be apparent from or reasonably suggested by the present invention and the foregoing description thereof, without departing from the substance or scope of the present invention. Accordingly, while the present invention has been described herein in detail in relation to its preferred embodiment, it is to be understood that this disclosure is only illustrative and exemplary of the present invention and is made merely for purposes of providing a full and enabling disclosure of the invention. The foregoing disclosure is not intended or to be construed to limit the present invention or otherwise to exclude any such other embodiments, adaptations, variations, modifications and equivalent arrangements, the present invention being limited only by the claims appended hereto and the equivalents thereof.

What is claimed is:

1. A computerized method for obtaining a bid by a professional on a project of a client, comprising the steps of:
  - 5 (a) maintaining a database of projects of clients, each project having a description and values specified by a client for a first set of predefined criteria;
  - (b) allowing a professional to access the database of projects to review the project descriptions;
  - 10 (c) receiving a bid from the professional for a particular project, the professional having associated therewith a profile including specified values for a second set of predefined criteria;
  - (d) comparing the specified values of the professional with the specified values of the particular project; and
  - 15 (e) forwarding the bid from the professional to the client of the particular project as a function of said comparison.
2. A method according to claim 1 wherein the first set of predefined criteria comprise role experience, industry experience, skills, and certifications for the project.
3. A method according to claim 1 wherein the second set of predefined criteria  
20 comprise role experience, industry experience, skills, and certifications of the professional.
4. A method according to claim 3 further comprising the steps of:
  - 25 (a) allowing the professional to specify values for the second set of predefined criteria; and
  - (b) generating a profile for the professional incorporating the specified values for the second set of predefined criteria.
5. A method according to claim 1 further comprising the step of maintaining a database of profiles of professionals.
6. A method according to claim 5, further comprising the steps of:
  - 30 (a) receiving a profile from a professional;
  - (b) performing a quality analysis of the profile by manually reviewing the profile for inconsistencies and obvious errors; and



- (c) adding the profile to the database of profiles of professionals as a function of said manual review.
7. A method according to claim 6, wherein said step of performing a quality analysis further comprises the step of performing a background check on the professional to verify the profile.
8. A method according to claim 7, wherein said step of conducting a background check on the professional comprises the step of validating academic credentials, references, skills, and years of experience of the professional.
9. A method according to claim 7, further comprising the step of assigning a screening level to the profile of the professional as a function of years of experience of the professional, number of projects of clients completed by the professional, and period of time for which the profile of the professional has been maintained in the database without receipt of a negative comment by a client regarding the professional.
10. A method according to claim 9 wherein each project further comprises a required screening level specified by the client, further comprising the step of comparing the screening level of the professional with the required screening level of the project, and wherein said step of forwarding comprises forwarding the bid to the client if the specified values and screening level of the professional respectively match the specified values and screening level of the particular project.
11. A method according to claim 1, where said allowing the professional to access the database includes allowing the professional to review the specified values of a project for the first set of predefined criteria.
12. A method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of enabling a search of the database of projects according to the descriptions of the projects.
13. A method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of enabling a search of the database of projects according to the respective specified values of the projects for the first set of predefined criteria.
14. A method according to claim 1, wherein said step of forwarding the bid comprises forwarding to the client the profile of the professional from which the bid is received.

15. A method according to claim 1, wherein said step of forwarding the bid comprises forwarding the bid to the client if the specified values of the professional respectively match the specified values of the particular project.
- 5 16. A method according to claim 1, wherein said step of forwarding the bid comprises forwarding the bid to the client if the specified values of the professional match a predetermined subset of the specified values of the particular project.
17. A method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of returning the bid to the professional as a function of said comparison.
- 10 18. A method according to claim 17, wherein said step of returning the bid further comprises notifying the professional that the specified values of the professional do not match the specified values of the particular project.
19. A method according to claim 17, wherein said step of returning the bid further comprises notifying the professional that he does not qualify for the particular project.
- 15 20. A method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of maintaining anonymity of the professional from which the bid is received during said step of forwarding the bid to the client.
21. A method according to claim 1, wherein the bid further comprises a stated hourly rate of the professional.
- 20 22. A method according to claim 1, further comprising the steps of receiving an offer from the client of the particular project and forwarding the offer to the professional from which the bid is received.
23. A method according to claim 22, further comprising the steps of receiving information regarding whether the offer is accepted by the professional and forwarding the information to the client of the particular project.
- 25 24. A method according to claim 1, further comprising the steps of receiving a request for additional information from the client of the particular project and forwarding the request to the professional from which the bid is received.
- 30 25. A method according to claim 1, further comprising the steps of receiving a request for an interview from the client of the particular project and forwarding the request to the professional from which the bid is received.

26. A method according to claim 25, further comprising the step of relaying a video conference between the professional from which the bid is received and the client of the particular project.
27. A method according to claim 1 wherein the specified values of the professional include availability dates on which the professional is available to work, wherein the specified values of the particular project include project dates during which work must be performed on the particular project, and wherein said step of forwarding the bid comprises forwarding the bid to the client if the availability dates match the project dates.
28. A computerized method for providing information regarding a particular project to a professional to facilitate bidding on the project by the professional, comprising the steps of:
- (a) maintaining a database of projects for clients, each project having a description specified by a client;
  - (b) allowing a professional to access the database of projects to review the descriptions;
  - (c) receiving a request for additional information for a particular project from the professional;
  - (d) forwarding the request for additional information to the client of the particular project; and
  - (e) maintaining the anonymity of the professional when forwarding the request for additional information to the client.
29. A method according to claim 28, further comprising the steps of receiving a response to the request for additional information from the client and forwarding the response to the professional.
30. A method according to claim 28, wherein each project further comprises values defined by the respective client for a first predefined set of criteria.
31. A method according to claim 30, further comprising maintaining a database of profiles for professionals, each profile including specified values for a second predefined set of criteria.
32. A method according to claim 31, further comprising the step of comparing the specified values for the second set of criteria of the professional requesting additional information for a particular project with the specified values for the

first set of criteria for the particular project; and wherein said step of forwarding the request for additional information to the client of the particular project is selectively performed based on the results of said comparison.

5 33. A method according to claim 32, further comprising the step of notifying the professional that the professional does not qualify for the particular project if the request for additional information is not forwarded based on said comparison.

10 34. A method according to claim 31, further comprising the step of comparing a predetermined subset of the specified values for the second set of criteria of the professional requesting additional information for a particular project with a predetermined subset of the specified values for the first set of criteria for the particular project; and wherein said step of forwarding the request for additional information to the client of the particular project is selectively performed based on the results said comparison.

15 35. A method according to claim 34, further comprising the step of notifying the professional that the professional does not qualify for the particular project if the request for additional information is not forwarded based on said comparison.

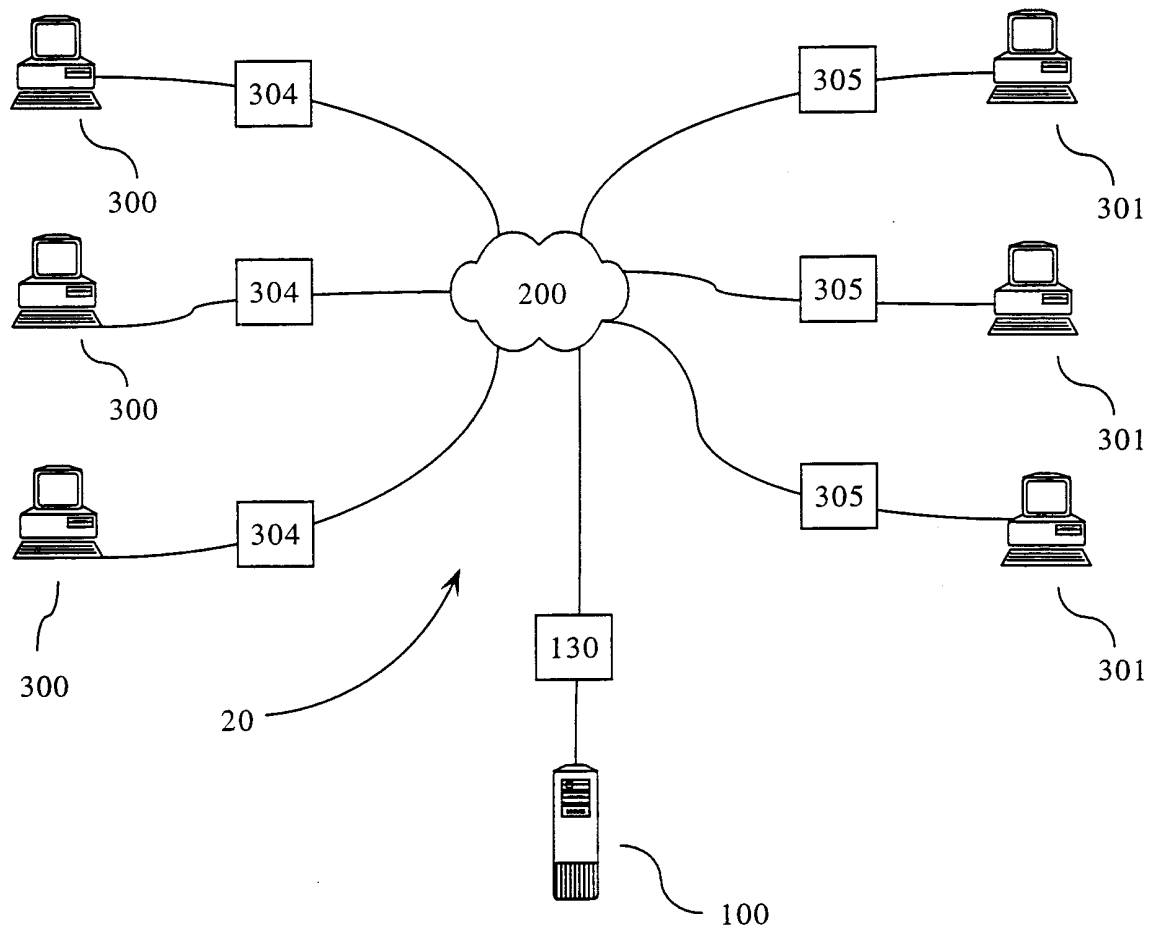
36. A method for selectively identifying profiles of professionals maintained in a database and used in screening professionals when bidding on projects of clients, comprising the steps of:

- 20 (a) receiving a profile from a professional;
- (b) performing a background check on the professional to verify the profile; and
- (c) assigning a screening level to the profile as a function of years of experience of the professional if the profile is verified.

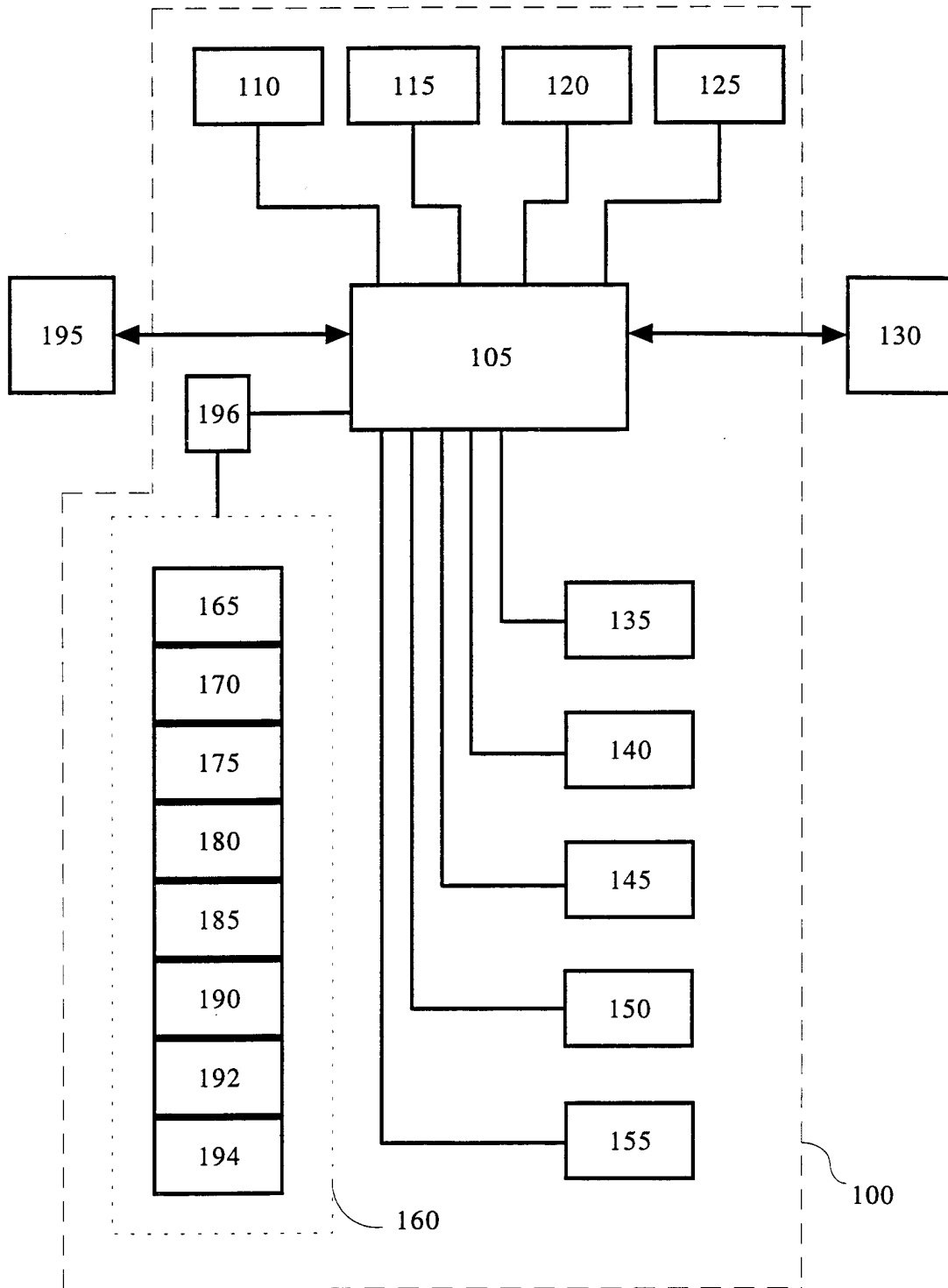
25 37. A method according to claim 36, wherein said step of conducting a background check on the professional comprises the step of validating academic credentials, references, skills, and years of experience of the professional.

30 38. A method according to claim 36, further comprising the steps of obtaining comments from each client for which the professional completes a project and assigning a screening level to the profile as a function of number of projects completed by the professional without receipt of a negative comment by a client regarding the professional.

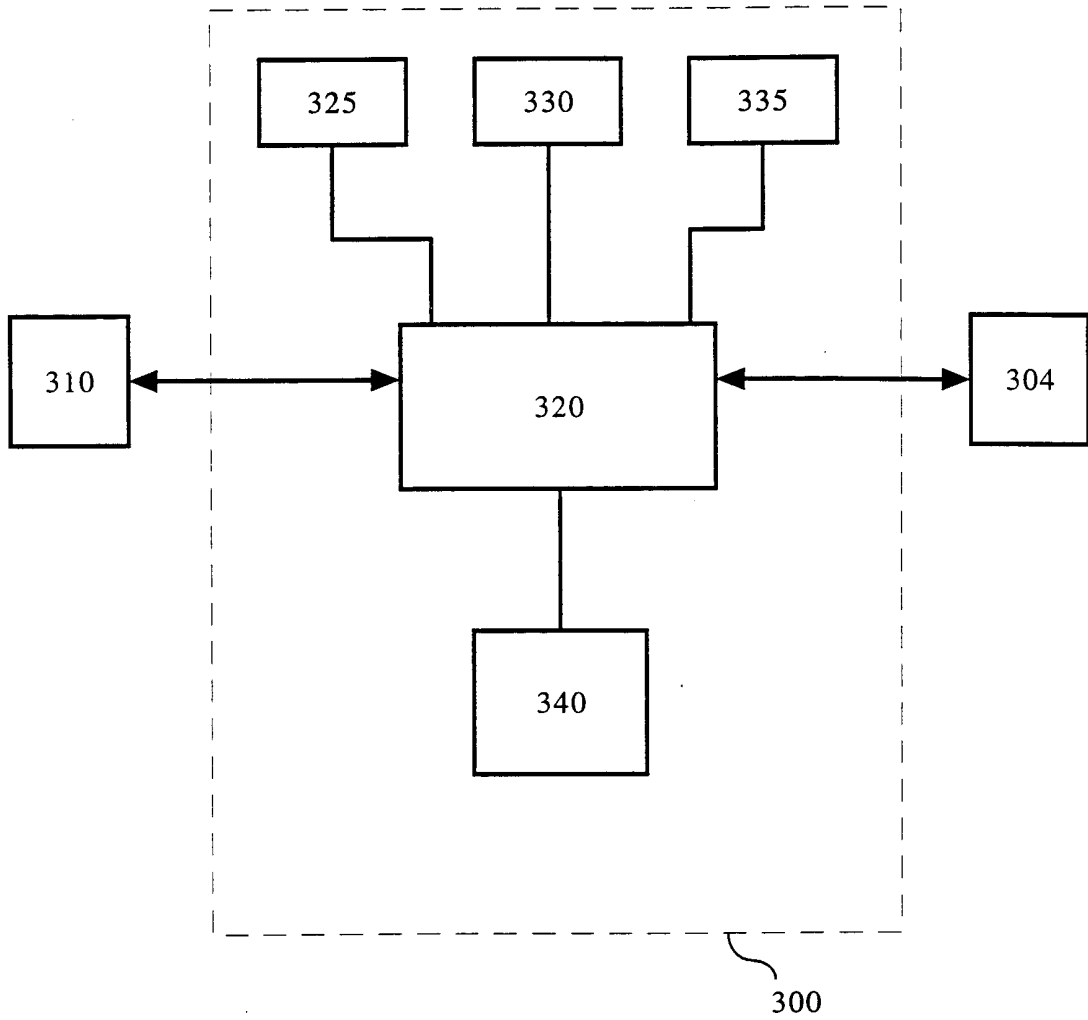
39. A method according to claim 36, further comprising the steps of obtaining comments from each client for which the professional works on a project and assigning a screening level to the profile as a function of time for which the profile of the professional has been maintained in the database without receipt  
5 of a negative comment by a client regarding the professional.



**FIG. 1**

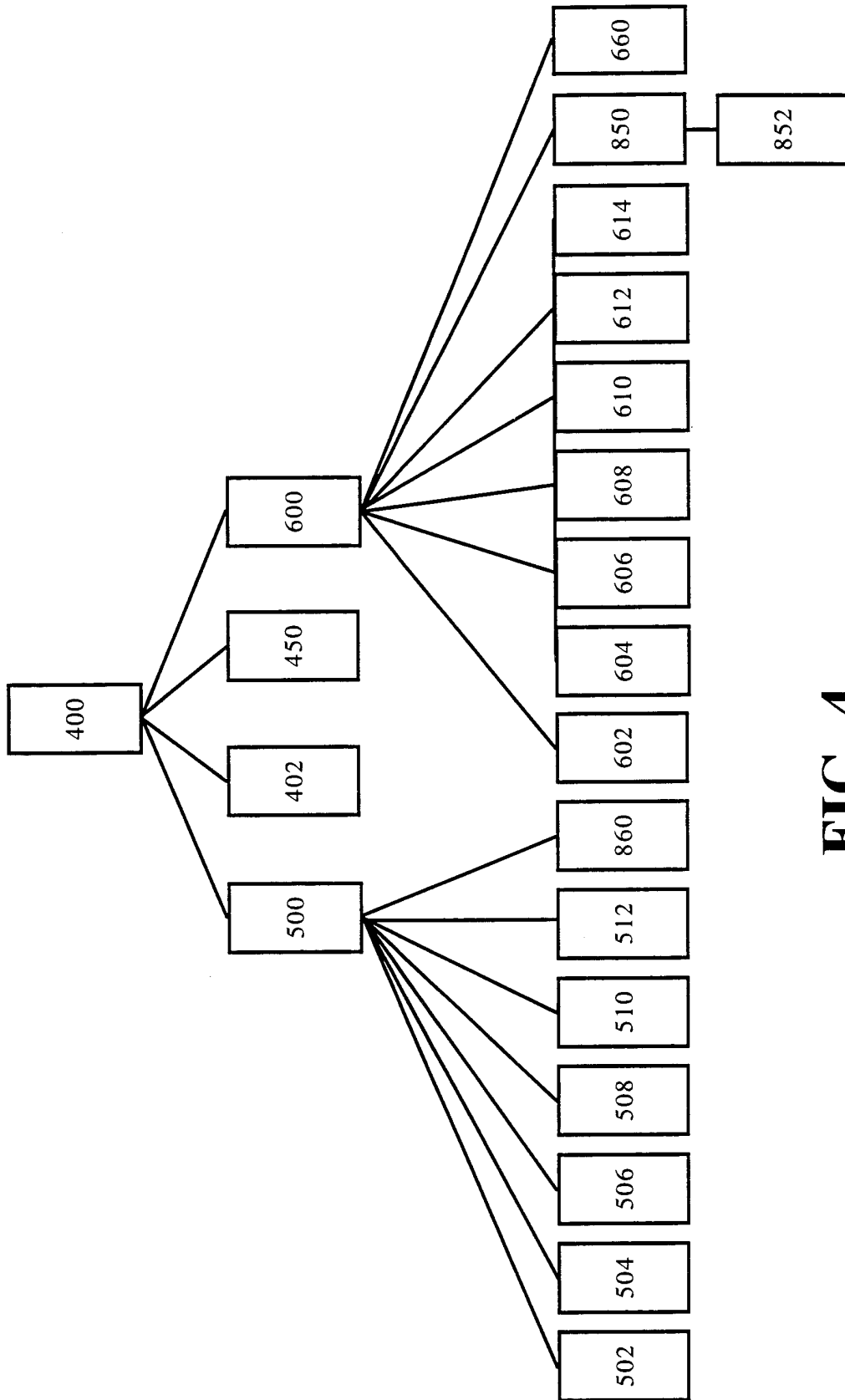


**FIG. 2**

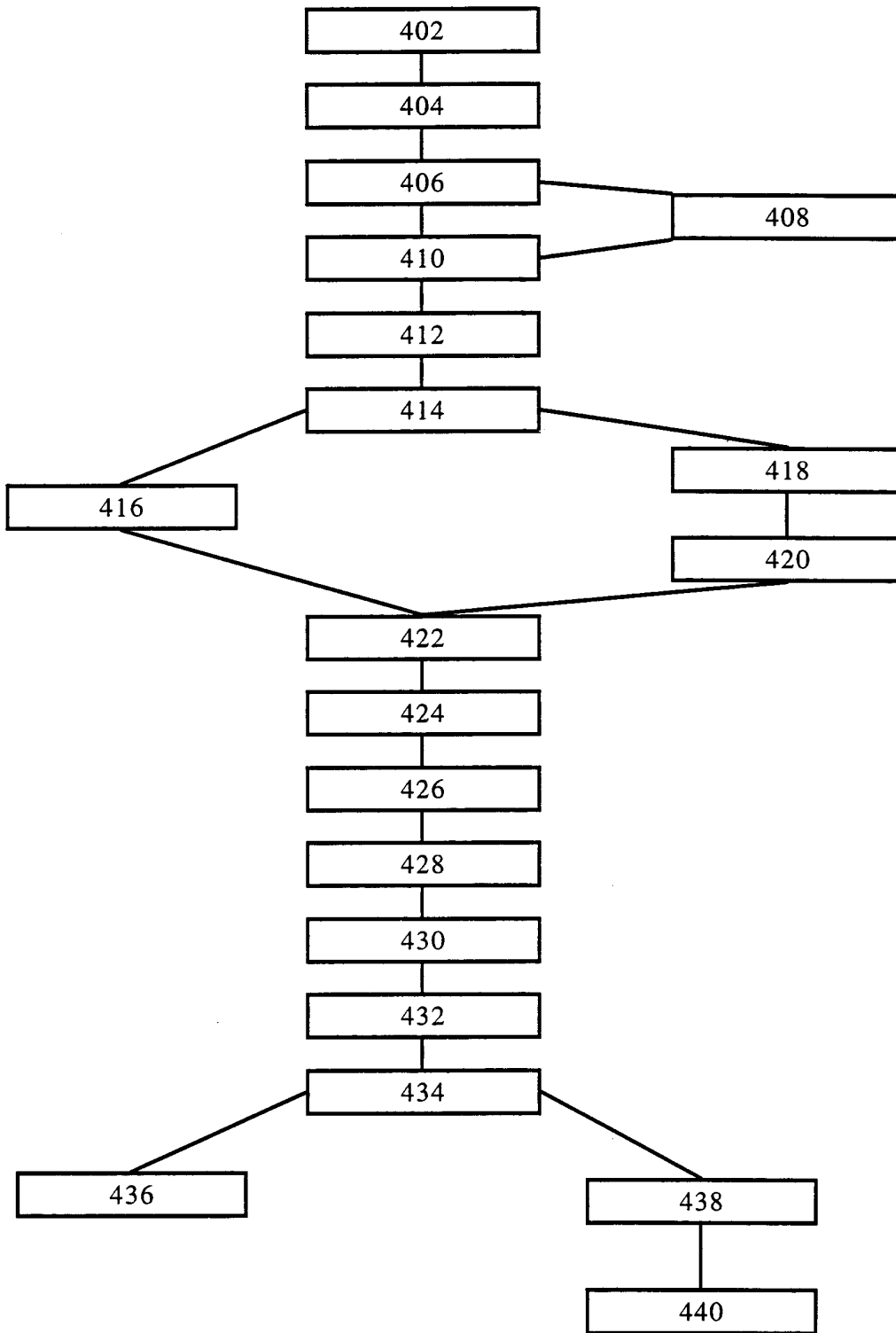


**FIG. 3**

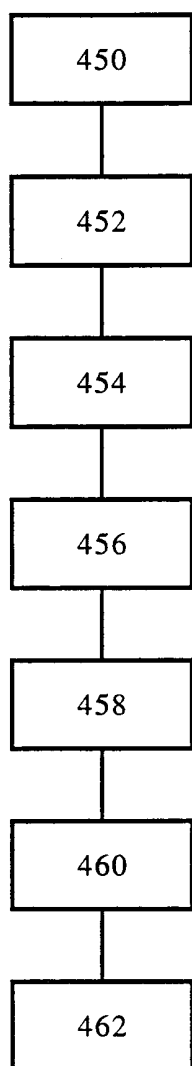




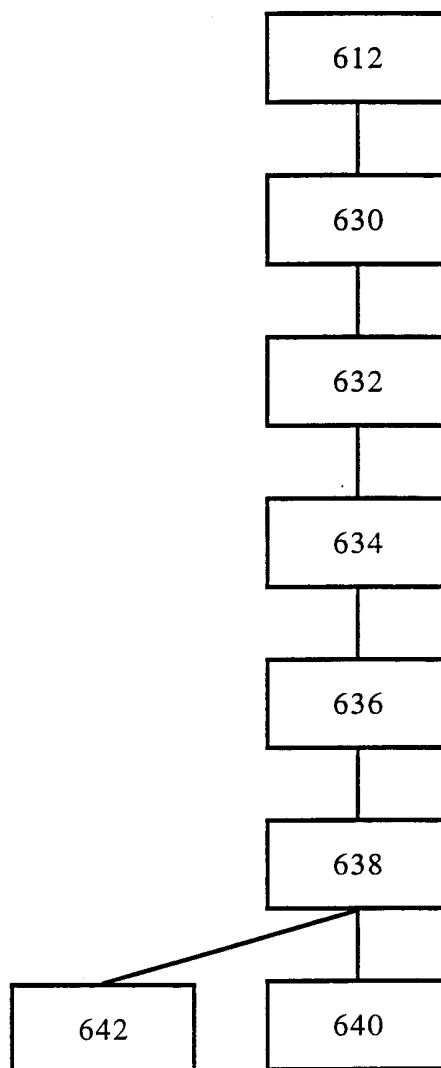
**FIG. 4**



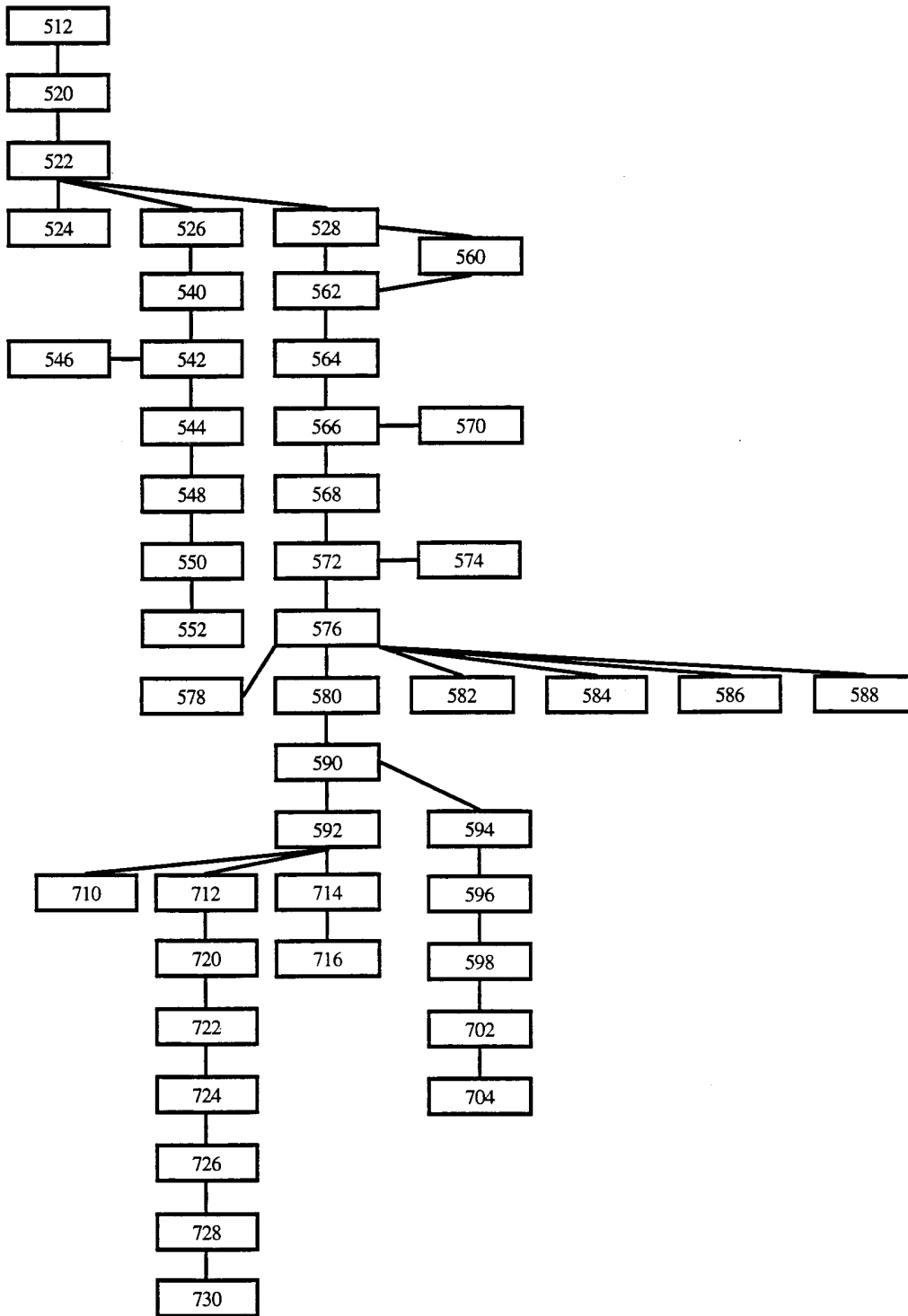
**FIG. 5**



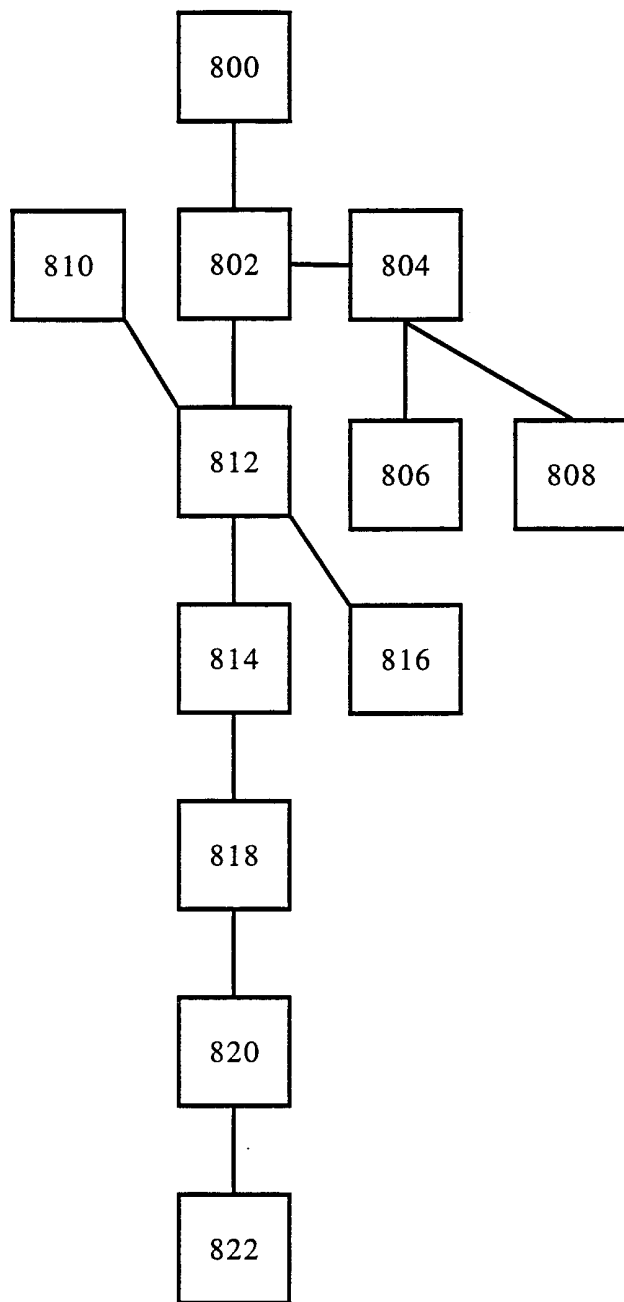
**FIG. 6**



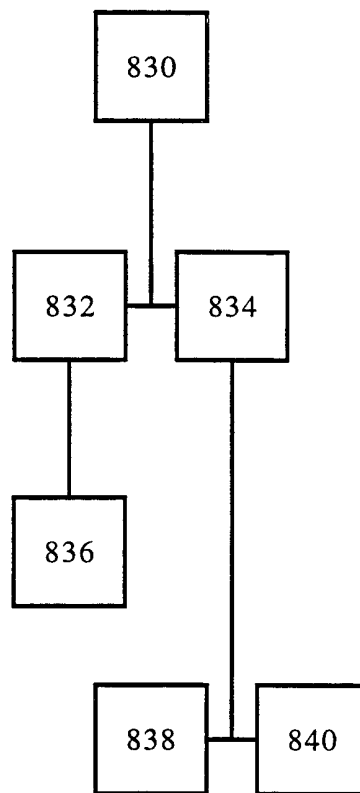
**FIG. 7**



**FIG. 8**



**FIG. 9**



**FIG. 10**

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.  
PCT/US99/23041

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(6) :G06F 17/60  
US CL : 705/1, 7, 8, 9

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 705/1, 7, 8, 9

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

WEST 1.2, EAST, DIALOGUE

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	US 5,918,207 A (MCGOVERN et al) 29 June 1999, col. 3, lines 25-56, col. 10, lines 13-29, col. 10, lines 30-44.	1-37
Y	US 5,164,897 A (CLARK et al) 17 November 1992, col. 3, lines 49-63, col. 5, lines 1-23.	1-37
Y	US 5,111,391 A (FIELDS et al) 05 May 1992, col. 3, lines 18-63, col. 4, lines 36-61.	1-37

Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.  See patent family annex.

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*P* document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed	

Date of the actual completion of the international search

06 DECEMBER 1999

Date of mailing of the international search report

03 FEB 2000

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