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(54) **ON-LINE INVENTION DISCLOSURE APPROVAL SYSTEM**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

(73) Assignees: **FORD GLOBAL TECHNOLOGIES, LLC**, Dearborn, MI (US); **FORD MOTOR COMPANY**, Dearborn, MI (US)

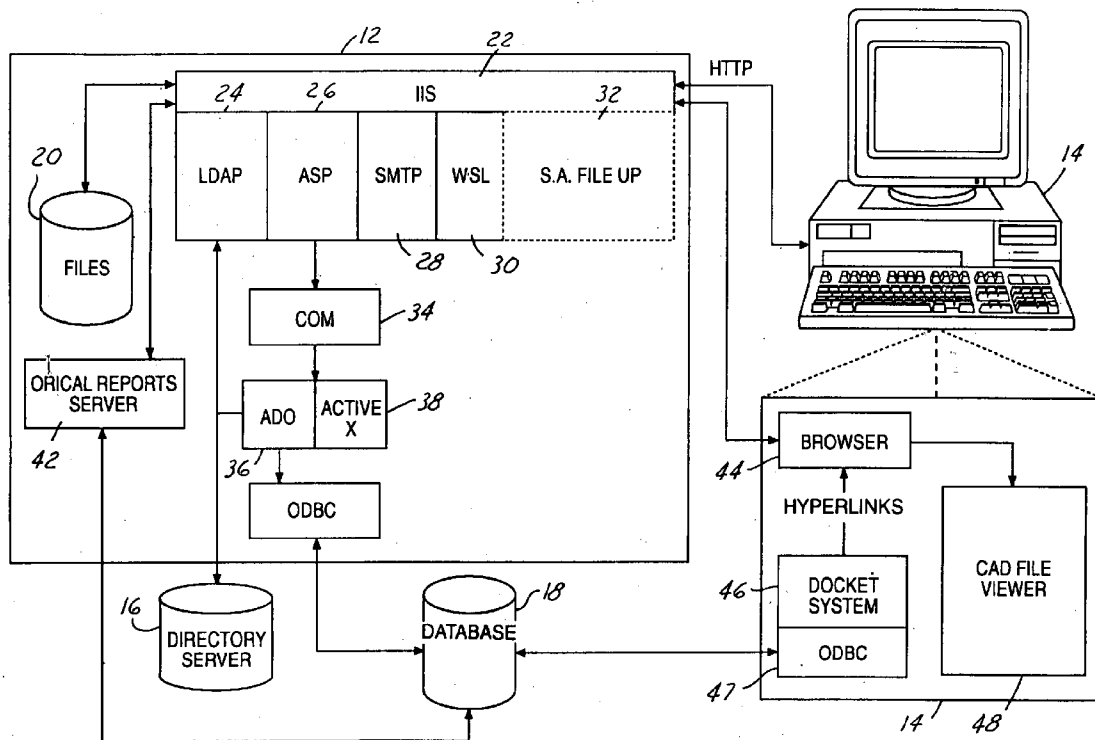
An on-line invention disclosure system includes a user computer (14) and a web server (12) having an identification subsystem (30). A database (18) is coupled to the server (12). The server provides user screens to the user to prompt users to provide user information to the server. The server receives disclosure information from the users and stores information in the database (18) and prompts the users to provide a password. Upon the proper password, access to the disclosure is granted. Before granting a docket number, approval is received from each of the inventors.

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**Related U.S. Application Data**

(63) Continuation of application No. 09/558,192, filed on Apr. 26, 2000, now abandoned.



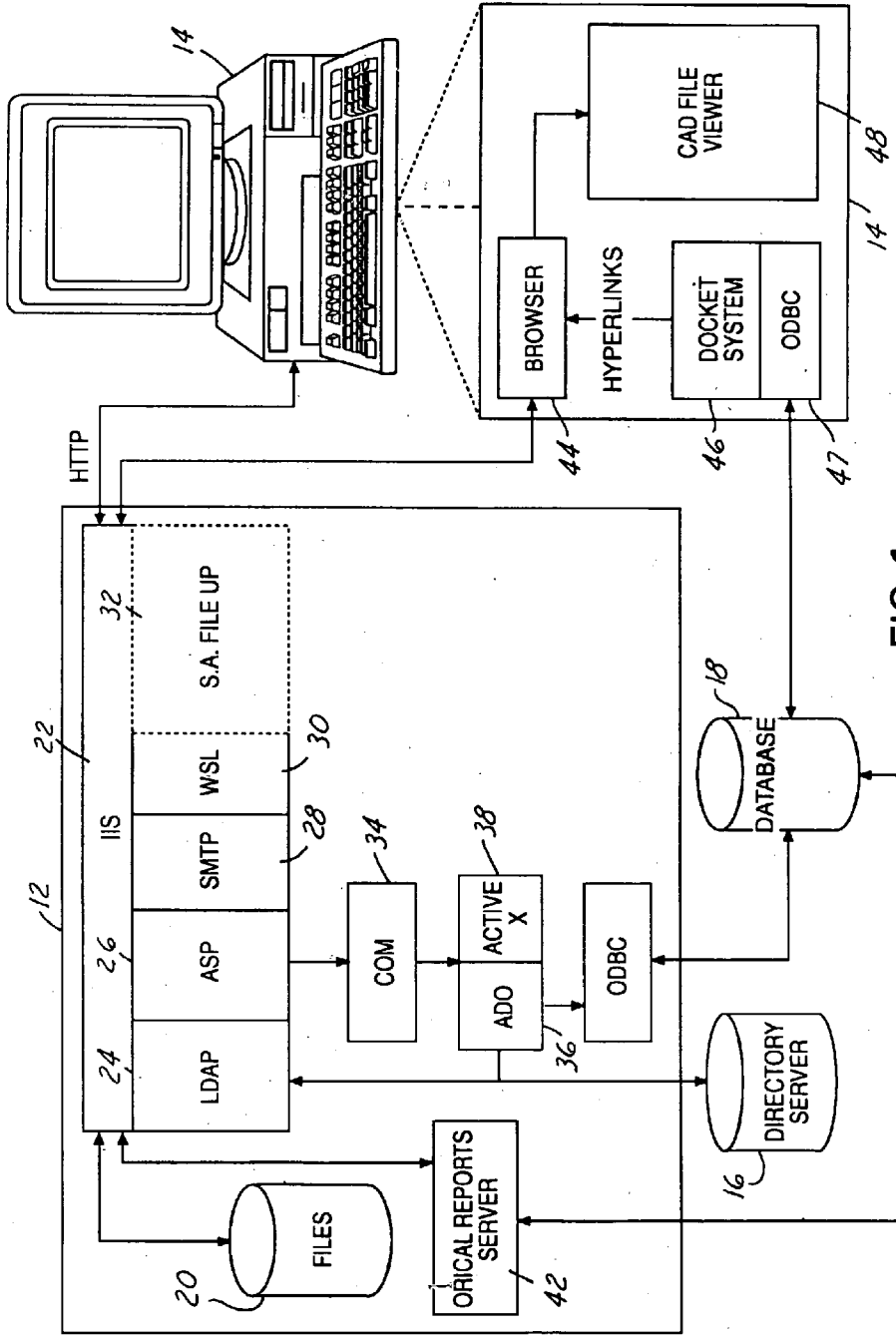


FIG. 1

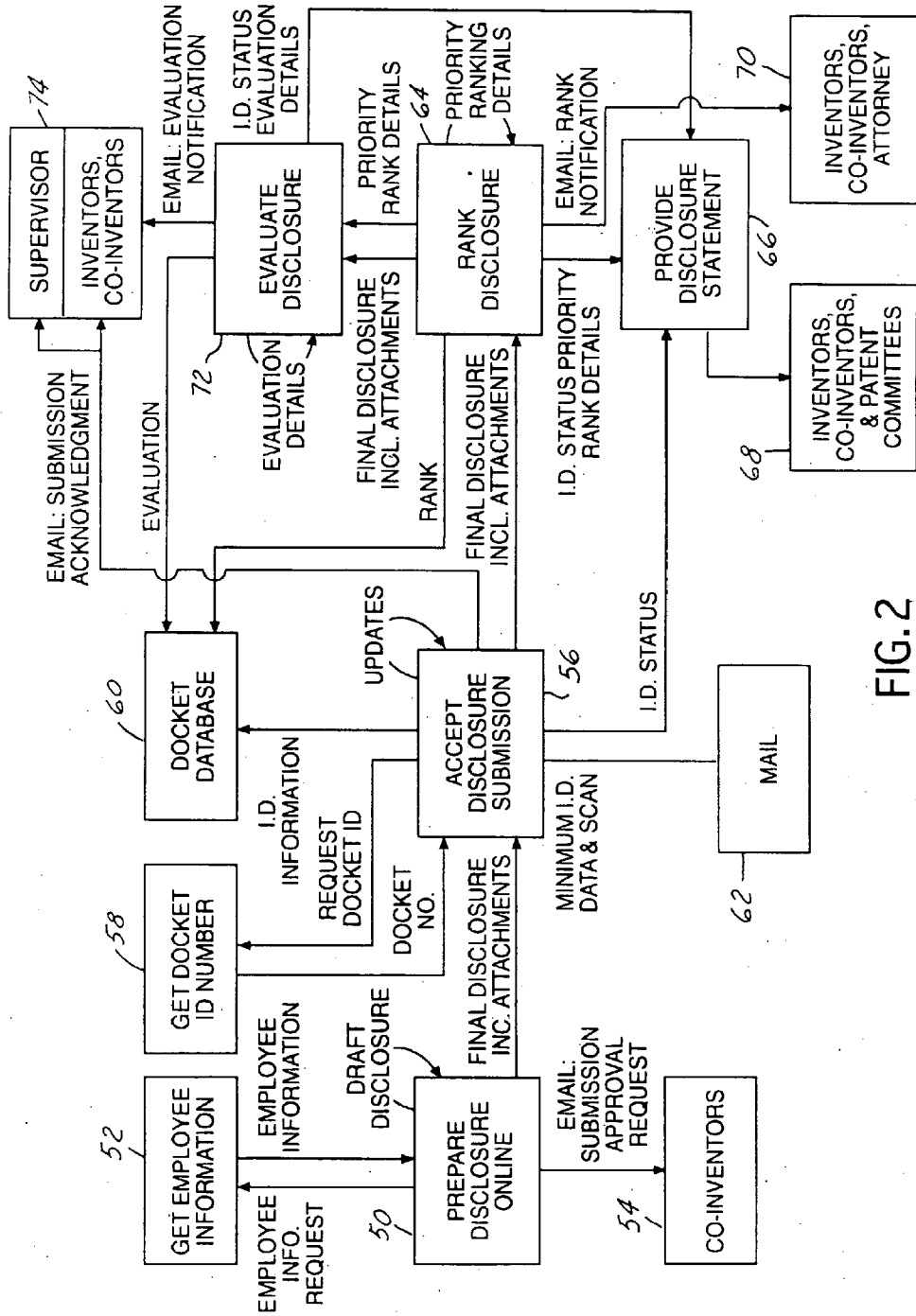
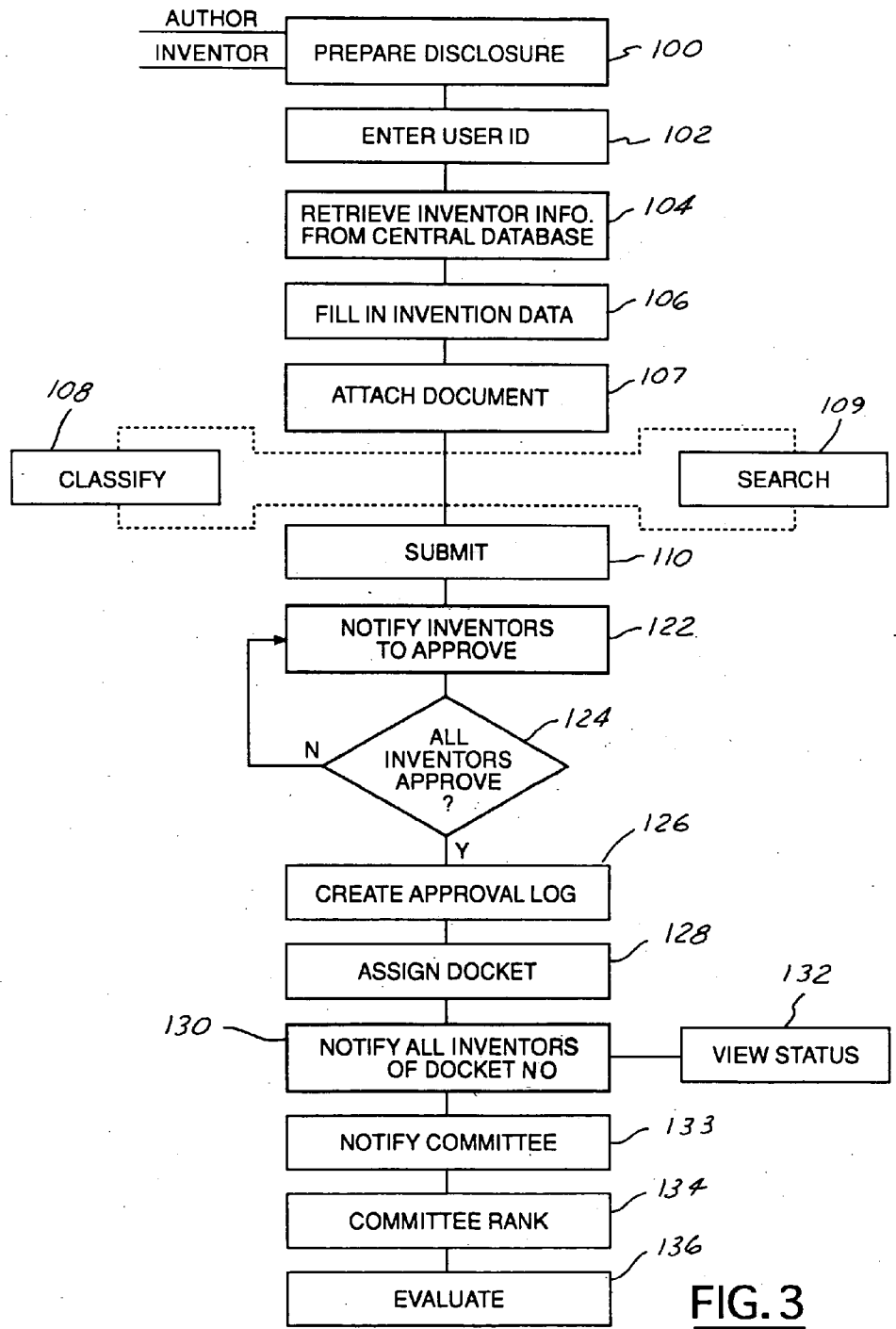
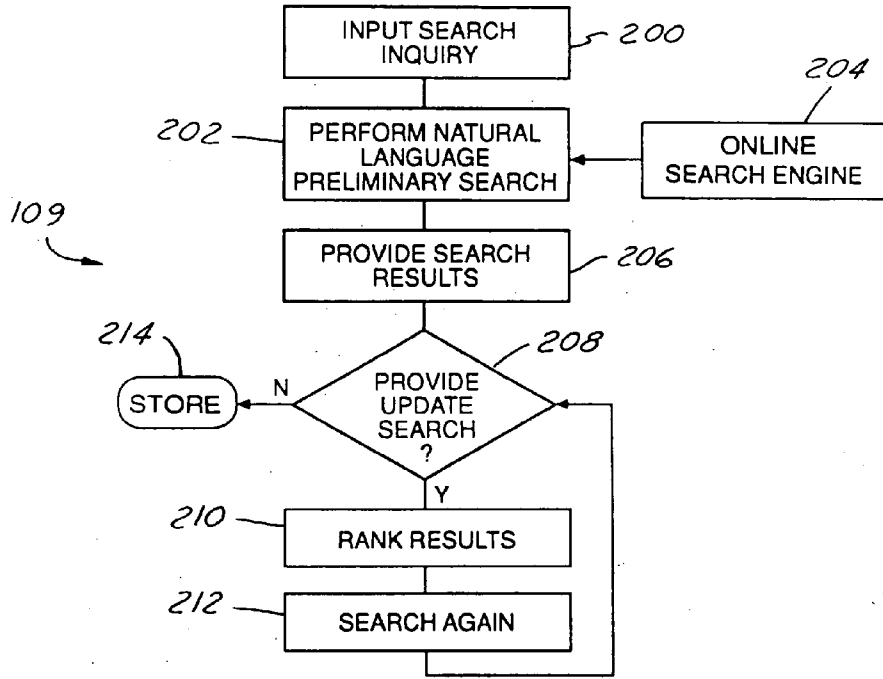


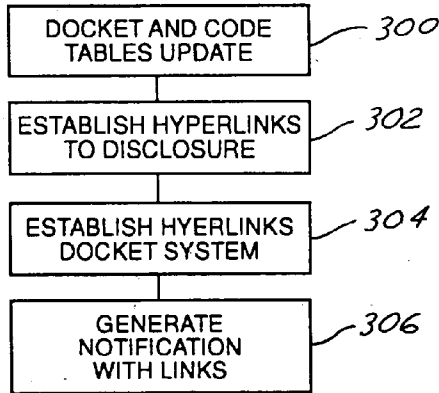
FIG. 2



**FIG. 3**



**FIG. 4**



**FIG. 5**

**ON-LINE INVENTION DISCLOSURE  
APPROVAL SYSTEM**

**TECHNICAL FIELD**

[0001] The present invention relates to an improved data processing system, and more particularly, to an on-line invention disclosure submission system.

**BACKGROUND**

[0002] In many companies, paper submission of forms such as invention disclosures are routinely used. Commonly these paper disclosures are mailed to a central location where they are logged into a system and provided to a patent coordinator or the corporate attorney. In large companies having several offices, these invention disclosures are mailed to the patent department or the patent coordinator. The paper systems are burdensome on staff and the disclosure documents may be subject to loss, misplacement or a misrouting error.

[0003] Therefore, there is a need to provide a substantially automated invention disclosure submissions process. Various aspects of such a process may be found in U.S. Pat. Nos. 5,247,661, 5,276,869, 5,317,683, and 5,377,355. These patents all describe various aspects of a data processing system. One drawback to this system described in these patents is that it is an electronic mail (E-mail) based system. Documents are transmitted back and forth between various locations. The system requires client software on individual user machines. This is particularly cumbersome in a large corporate environment having multiple locations in multiple countries. The drawback being that as migration to new updated software packages is performed, the users in all locations may not have the proper software to access the system. Therefore, certain disclosures may not ever be made due to the inconvenience. The prior patents also describe that the documents are transmitted to each user's machine for processing. Such a system, however, requires high bandwidth to support the exchange of documents from the central location to the user. Such a system, particularly in large corporations, is impractical since large bandwidth allocations for such a system are not desirable ways to use system resources.

[0004] It would therefore be desirable to provide an on-line invention disclosure system that does not require high bandwidth for each user to have special software.

[0005] Corporate patent departments also typically maintain a docketing system. The docketing system keeps track of the disclosures as they are processed by the patent department. The docketing system maintains the status of disclosures for the patent attorneys and patent coordinators and of any patent applications originating therefrom. Various due dates of the docket system are also tracked. Typically, inventors must call the patent department to determine the status of their invention disclosure because the docket system is inaccessible to them. This process is also time consuming for staff. It would therefore be desirable to provide a system capable of automatically notifying and/or allowing inventors to access some or all of the information in a corporate docketing system so that the status may be readily determined by the inventors.

[0006] Typically, invention disclosures are searched prior to preparing a patent application therefrom. Commonly, the disclosures are read and a computer or manual search is performed sometime after the disclosure is submitted. Also, the inventors typically have little input to the process. It would

also be desirable to perform a search during the invention disclosure submission process. Consequently, it would also be desirable to allow, the inventor to participate or help direct the search.

[0007] In paper type systems and in the systems above, one inventor is responsible for preparing the invention disclosure document. It is presumed that concurrence has been achieved between the author of the invention disclosure and the other inventors. Oftentimes this is not achieved and the invention disclosure is processed according to company policies without concurrence. It would therefore be desirable to provide an automated invention disclosure system that does not allow the disclosure to be processed until concurrence has been reached by each of the inventors.

**SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION**

[0008] It is therefore one object of the invention to provide an automated invention disclosure system that overcomes the drawbacks of prior known systems. The present invention provides a web based on-line invention disclosure system that may, for example, be used in cooperation with a corporate intranet.

[0009] In one aspect of the invention an on-line invention disclosure system includes a user computer and a web server having an identification subsystem. A database is coupled to the server. The server provides user screens to the user to prompt users to provide user information to the server. The server receives disclosure information from the users and stores information in the database and prompts the users to provide a password. Upon the proper password, access to the disclosure is granted. Before granting a docket number, approval is received from each of the inventors.

[0010] In a further aspect of the invention, a method of forming an on-line invention disclosure comprises the steps of

[0011] forming an invention disclosure online by entering a plurality of selected information including a first inventor identification information;

[0012] as the plurality of selected information is entered, storing the information in a central storage location; and

[0013] prompting approval of said first inventor.

[0014] One advantage of the invention is that the system is platform independent. That is, PC, Mac or UNIX based terminals may all access the web based on-line disclosure system. Another advantage of the present invention is that the document resides in one location and may be "viewed" by the inventors, the corporate patent staff, and evaluation committee members. The document itself does not actually get transferred as in the E-mail based systems.

[0015] Another advantage of the invention is that inventors may access predetermined information from an on-line docketing system. Also, the docketing system may obtain invention information from the on-line docket system.

[0016] Another advantage of the invention is that evaluation committee members may automatically receive notices that invention disclosures are ready to be evaluated.

[0017] Other objects and features of the present invention will become apparent when viewed in light of the detailed description of the preferred embodiment when taken in conjunction with the attached drawings and appended claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- [0018] FIG. 1 is a high level block diagram of a disclosure system according to the present invention.
- [0019] FIG. 2 is a functional flow chart of a disclosure system according to the present invention.
- [0020] FIG. 3 is a flow chart of the operation of a disclosure system according to the present invention.
- [0021] FIG. 4 is a flow chart of a search process according to the present invention.
- [0022] FIG. 5 is a flow chart of a docket system according to the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0023] In the following figures the same reference numerals will be used to identify the same components in the various views. Various examples and parameters are set forth in the following description. These are meant to be by way of example and not meant to limit the scope of the invention. The following example describes an on-line invention disclosure system. However, other types of collaborative authoring systems may utilize the same principles and concepts such as authoring technical and other papers.

[0024] Referring now to FIG. 1, an on-line invention disclosure system 10 is illustrated. On-line disclosure system 10 is web based system having a web server 12 that is coupled to a plurality of users, one of which is shown as user computer 14. The web server 12 as will be further described below may be coupled to a directory server 16 containing user information and to a database system 18. Database 18 may contain both docketing information and disclosure information. Although illustrated as one, database 18 may be comprised of two or more databases that are linked together. Various tables are established in database 18 and some of the information located in the docket tables may be linked with the disclosure tables as will be further described below.

[0025] Web server 12 has a file memory 20 that stores various files therein. Memory 20 is coupled to the Internet Information Server (IIS) 22. IIS 22 controls the operation of the system. IIS 22, for example, may have a lightweight directory access process (LDAP) 24, active server pages (ASP) 26, send mail transfer protocol (SMTP) 28, web single login (WSL) 30, and SAFile-up 32.

[0026] LDAP 24 is a protocol for accessing directory server 16. The LDAP 24 permits the retrieval of various user information from the directory server such as the employee's location, phone numbers, etc. in response to the entry of identification information. ASP 26 provides the scripts for the various pages that are viewed by the user. The scripts also control how the information is retrieved from the database 18 and how information is stored therein. Various scripts may be used for various situations in various companies. Preferably, the scripts prompt the user for a complete disclosure that may include a brief summary of the problem solved and a description of the present solution and how it solves the problem. Of course, numerous other categories of information may be prompted.

[0027] SMTP 18 provides the formatting for the company specific E-mail system. Various types of E-mail formatting would be evident to those skilled in the art. WLS 30 provides an identification subsystem whereby identification information such as the user's corporate ID and password are authenticated. A password may be established for each disclosure

during the initial entry into the system. Thereafter, the password may be used to view the disclosure and view the status thereof. SAFile-up 32 is a software package provided by software artisans that allows the user's PC to couple various documents to the invention disclosure. LDAP 24 is coupled to directory server 16.

[0028] ASP 26 is coupled to COM 34. COM 34 are the objects run on server 12. COM 34 is coupled to ADO 36 which is coupled to Active X 38. ADO 36 and Active X are known types of object formatting that allow the information to be displayed in a convenient format. ADO 36 is coupled to ODBC 40, a known type of database driver. ODBC 40 is coupled to docket system 10.

[0029] IIS 22 may also be coupled to a report server 42. Report server 42 may be coupled to docket system 18. Report server 42 provides printable reports to the various system users.

[0030] IIS 22 may also be coupled to user computer 14 that has a browser 44, a docket system program 46 that is coupled through an ODBC 47 to docket system 18. Browser 44 may be one of the many types of web browsers currently available that is capable of communicating through the common http protocol. The patent staff and patent coordinators may be the only users with direct access to the docket database through docket system program 46 and ODBC 47. Typical users may obtain selected docket information from the docket system through server 12 as will be described below. Browser 44 may also be coupled to file viewers such as a CAD file viewer 48. Some computer aided design (CAD) systems may require an interface to operate with a web browser. CAD file viewer 48 may be one of such systems typically employed on these types of machines. Generally, as will be further described below, the web server 12 retains the various documents while user computers 14 may view selected portions of the document without having to transmit the document back and forth between various users.

[0031] Referring now to FIG. 2, a block diagram of the process of the present invention is illustrated. As is described below, a user may be an inventor or just an author that enters the information in to the disclosure system 10. User and inventor are used interchangeably because in most circumstances the user is an inventor but need not be. The author system allows company personnel to enter inventions by non-company personnel in the system. In block 50, the disclosure is prepared on-line. Passwords or other security measures may be employed through the identification subsystem before access to the system may be gained. Preferably, a corporate directory service or other directory information may be used to assist the user in filling out the disclosure. For example, a get employee information block 52 may be coupled to the prepare disclosure on line block 50 to provide the user information at the user's request in response to some identification information such as an E-mail ID, an employee number or the like. This employee user information thus becomes associated with the particular disclosure being prepared. Block 50 may also allow the user to identify other co-inventors and request approval from co-inventors in block 54. The co-inventors of block 54 are preferably notified via an E-mail that the author has prepared an invention disclosure listing them as a co-inventor and that they should either assist in drafting the disclosure or approve the final draft. For convenience, the e-mail notification may include a hyperlink so that the disclosure and a connection with the server may be obtained. In block 50, the inventor may be asked to fill in predetermined

disclosure information such as a brief description or comments, comment on prior art, give a brief description on the new technology provided by the invention, various invention dates, provide classification information such as company classification codes, and miscellaneous other invention information such as whether a government contract was used or if the invention was disclosed to non-company personnel. The prepare disclosure on-line block 50 may also inquire whether other documents exist so that they may be attached to the disclosure as file attachments. The file attachments may be word processing documents, CAD files, presentation documents or various other types of documents.

[0032] When approval has been obtained from each co-inventor, the accept disclosure submission block 56 locks the document so no further changes can be made and obtains a docket ID number from a docketing system 58. The disclosure system makes the request and the docket system provides the next available docket number. The docket system in block 60 may also be linked to provide various other information from the on-line invention disclosure system 10.

[0033] In addition to accepting disclosures through an on-line system 56, provisions may also be made for accepting mail-in disclosures as was traditionally done. In this manner, the disclosures may be scanned into the system by the patent staff but are received from mail block 62.

[0034] Once the disclosure information has been finalized and accepted, block 64 may be performed wherein the disclosures may be ranked. An evaluator may receive an E-mail notice that a disclosure is available in his technology area. The disclosures may be ranked by a patent committee that looks at the priority ranking criteria and evaluates the disclosure accordingly. These details may vary depending on the company. The evaluation may be provided to the docket database in block 60.

[0035] Once ranked, the inventors may view the ranking in block 66. By logging on to the system through a web browser or other method, the inventors may monitor the invention disclosure through the process. Various inventors, co-inventors and patent committees in block 68 may be provided various information on the status of the disclosure. This may be done automatically as standardized letters generated by the server 12 or through an E-mail with a hyperlink to the disclosure or the status information. The ranking of the disclosure may also be provided to inventors, co-inventors, and the attorneys responsible in block 70.

[0036] After ranking, the responsible attorney may evaluate the invention disclosure in block 72 for patentability. Block 72 is coupled to block 66 so that the disclosure evaluation status may also be provided to inventors, co-inventors and patent committees in block 68. The evaluation of the disclosure may also be provided to the docket database 60. The evaluation of the disclosure in block 72 and the disclosure submission 56 may be provided to a supervisor, inventor or co-inventor by way of E-mail in block 74. The E-mails preferably contain hyperlinks so that the invention may be easily viewed by clicking on the hyperlink. Further details of the system are described further below.

[0037] Referring now to FIG. 3, the invention disclosure is prepared on-line in step 100. An author or inventor may prepare the invention disclosure. Preferably, the author or inventor or both obtain access through a corporate Intranet or the Internet. In step 102, the user enters identification information (ID) for the system. This may also consist of a password or other security if this is a subsequent access to the

system. The following, however, is based upon an initial submission of an invention disclosure. In step 104, the information may be received from a central database or directory server maintained by the company. Various invention data is filled into the disclosure in step 106. As described above, the invention data is preferably as detailed information as the inventor may provide. The invention data may be prompted from the on-line disclosure system through a series of direct questions and answers, or the user may be directed to various segments where broad questions are answered and the inventor may expound, or a combination of both. In step 107, if any documents such as prints, flow charts, CAD files or other information would be helpful to the preparation of a patent application from the disclosure, the documents may be attached so that they are stored in the system with the disclosure.

[0038] Optional steps 108 and 109 may also be performed. Step 108 classifies invention disclosure based on the information filled therein. Step 108 is further described below. In step 109, a search may be prompted using the various information from the system. The search may also interact with the inventor to determine whether the search is finding appropriate information. The search step 109 also is further described below.

[0039] In step 110, the invention disclosure is submitted as a draft by the author. This draft submission is an approval by the author/inventor. In step 122, the other inventors are notified to approve the invention disclosure. As mentioned above, the notification may be an E-mail with a hyperlink to the disclosure on the on-line system in a web based manner. In step 124, if all inventors do not approve the disclosure then step 122 is executed again. If other inventors change the invention disclosure then approval for the changed draft should be obtained from all other inventors including the authoring inventor. When all the inventors approve the document, the document is locked to prevent further changes. Preferably, an approval log becomes associated with the invention disclosure once all the inventors approve the invention disclosure in step 126. The approval log will demonstrate that each inventor reviewed and approved the same final version of the disclosure. Approval in step 124 may also entail a variety of other functions including agreeing to an associated document such as an assignment of the invention, a power of attorney or other bookkeeping functions.

[0040] After approval, the disclosure becomes permanently and unchangeably (locked) part of the system by receiving a docket number assigned in step 128 so that tracking may be provided. The docket number is obtained from the docket system. In step 130, all inventors are notified of the docket number. The inventors may view the status in step 132 of the invention. Preferably, notification takes place by way of E-mail and may have a predetermined letter with a hyperlink therein. The hyperlink may be used to provide quick access to the system through the corporate Intranet or the Internet.

[0041] In step 133, an invention ranking committee or committees are notified to rank the invention disclosure. If a number of committees are used, the proper committee may be assigned by the corporate classification code entered by the inventor/author. The committee ranks the disclosure in step 134. The system may also set an evaluation meeting of various committee members to rank the disclosure. To view the disclosure the committee members may click on a hyperlink from an E-mail or otherwise access the invention disclosure system. A ranking sheet or screen with various ranking crite-



ria may become associated with the disclosure. The committee ranking may be provided to the inventors through notification such as an E-mail or the disclosure may be accessed by the inventors from a previous notification.

**[0042]** In step **136**, the invention disclosure may be automatically assigned to a member of the patent staff for evaluation based upon the corporate classification code. At all times the patent staff, the inventors and committee members preferably may access the system to obtain information as to the status of the system.

**[0043]** Referring now to FIG. **4**, step **109** is illustrated in further detail. In step **109**, an optional search function may be included with the on-line invention disclosure system. The search is provided to give evaluators the state of the art to assist in their evaluation. A search inquiry is formulated in step **200**. The search inquiry may be manually entered or search terms may be derived from the disclosure itself. Boolean searching may be performed. Preferably, natural language searching may be performed from using selected sections of the invention disclosure that may include a detailed description section or the problem/solution section. Also, the user may be prompted to enter search terms to be used in addition to the disclosure information. Various types of natural searching language engines may be used. Typically, these natural language search engines rank the various terms of the search inquiries such as the portions of the invention disclosure and perform a search through various on-line search engines from various search vendors through a natural language search as shown in step **202**. On-line search engines **204** provide the results of the search to the user. This preferably is a required step although the on-line disclosure system may make this step optional. The on-line search engine may include, for example, interfacing with the patent office website, or various other commercial searching websites known to those skilled in the art. Many corporations subscribe to a commercial search service vendor. In step **204**, the results of the search are provided to the inventor. The results may, for example, provide the top ten results from the search. In step **208**, the inventor may be prompted to provide a narrower search. In step **208** the search may be refined using the various terms received from the documents of the first search or previous searches and the search terms from the disclosure document. For example, various documents can be selected as being on point and the wording from these documents may be weighted in addition to the prior search in step **210**. Other documents that are not relevant may receive a negative weighting so that similar documents do not appear on the list

of most relevant documents. The invention disclosure information may then be repeatedly searched again in step **212** in view of the revised terms. Referring back to step **208**, after the search has been sufficiently refined, the results are stored together with the disclosure in step **214**.

**[0044]** Referring now to FIG. **5**, the invention disclosure system may also be coupled to an on-line docket system. Various information may be shared between the docket system and the on-line invention disclosure system. For example, common information such as a date stamp may be provided as well as other information not limited to the title, the classification code, inventor name, an inventor acknowledgement and an assignment. This information may be provided to the docketing system in step **300**. Upon approval, for example, the docketing system may provide a docket number to the disclosure system as mentioned above. In step **302**, hyperlinks may be established to the disclosure for use by the various committees, the patent staff evaluator, and the inventors. This hyperlink may also require the establishment of a password to enter the system and access the particular disclosure. Preferably, each inventor only has access to their own disclosures. Patent committee members preferably have access to all disclosures that have been submitted by the various inventors whose area of technology (corporate classification code) is within that of the particular committee. Hyperlinks may be established to the docket system in step **304**. Various notifications may be provided to the inventors and the patent committee members through E-mails or otherwise with various hyperlinks to the sites in step **306**.

**[0045]** While particular embodiments of the invention have been shown and described, numerous variations alternate embodiments will occur to those skilled in the art. The example describes an on-line invention disclosure system. Other types of collaborative authoring systems may utilize the same principles and concepts such as authoring technical and other papers. Accordingly, it is intended that the invention be limited only in terms of the appended claims.

**1-23.** (canceled)

**24.** A method of forming an online invention disclosure comprising:

forming an invention disclosure online by entering a plurality of selected information including a first inventor identification information;  
as the plurality of selected information is entered, storing the information in a central storage location; and  
prompting approval of said first inventor.

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