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Promoting collaboration across the IP lifecycle

Driving collaboration across the intellectual property lifecycle maximises return on your IP investments, writes Adam Kenney of Thomson Reuters

As IP has come to be recognised as the leading asset for an organisation, it has moved from the purview of the legal department to front and centre, encompassing legal, R&D, information specialists, business strategists, licensing experts, outside counsel, and others. With this expanded scope and heightened prominence, there is a greater need for IP processes that are carefully crafted, well-defined and enforceable throughout the organisation. Having such processes promotes collaboration across the entire IP lifecycle, helping organisations get ideas to market faster.

Some critics claim, however, that organisations with too much structure surrounding the innovation process can stymie the creativity of employees, and slow the pace of transforming concepts into IP assets. And while legal requirements are fairly standard for creating and maintaining IP, organisations can vary greatly their internal processes. The question remains: what processes are needed to get the most from innovative ideas?

Why structured processes are important

Many organisations take a siloed approach to managing their IP portfolio, with specialists focused on – ideation, portfolio maintenance, infringement research etc. Each stakeholder area has its own business processes that address its part in the IP lifecycle, but the lack of a collaborative IP process hinders the ability to understand what other stakeholders need to be effective in their activities. As a result, organisations face a myriad of challenges including:

- Risk – when the legal team doesn't know what IP assets are in use, they can make costly mistakes during annual maintenance reviews.
- Missed opportunities – when organisations have an inconsistent invention review process, business teams may overlook ideas with great commercial potential.

- Lack of visibility – when senior IP executives can't see the path ideas follow from inception to commercialisation, it's difficult to make good strategic decisions about where to invest and how to make contingency plans for products going off-patent.

So how do you ensure consistent collaboration across your organisation? Start by defining processes, encompassing all of the critical business units across the entire IP lifecycle. It's important to involve stakeholders – you need to understand the core jobs of each individual group and their needs before you can identify synergies between them.

Next, you should identify the hand-offs, dependencies and potential synergies between stakeholders managing different activities throughout the innovation process. For example, you may find that the legal team could make better maintenance decisions if they had greater visibility into commercial use of patents and brands; or that your licensing team might be able to spot new revenue opportunities among invention disclosures that are not pursued for your own product lines; or even that your field support team could better identify potential infringers if they were more knowledgeable about your portfolio. In other words, you want to ensure that the right people have the right information – at the right time – to make the best possible decisions.

The role of IP management systems

Of course, it's not enough for organisations simply to define processes. They must be able to establish, manage and enforce them effectively. Many organisations leverage IP management systems that allow them to:

- Model 'standard' IP processes, with the flexibility to accommodate different needs.
- Visualise, communicate and enact the processes.
- Easily change processes as they evolve.
- Create an architecture that can be easily extended with the addition of new step types.

A good intellectual asset management system such as Thomson IP Manager from Thomson Reuters allows you to architect IP management processes to fit the unique needs of your organisation. You can design processes visually, presenting them in a way people can easily understand. A visual representation is an excellent way to spot problems and identify gaps. This capability expands your ability to design a collaborative system that brings users together from across the business.

Managing change

Creating a collaborative organisational culture involves more than just implementing the right IP management system. Putting structured processes in place often requires individuals to change the way they do things, and this can lead to resistance. It is important to communicate and celebrate actively the benefits of changed processes, such as improved visibility resulting in new business opportunities, or better communication resulting in less time wasted resolving misunderstandings.

It's also important to convey the "big picture" of processes, which allows individuals to see where they fit in and how they add value across the IP lifecycle. And you should promote regular reviews to gather input on how to make processes better, which gives individuals a sense of ownership and reassures them that processes can evolve as conditions change.

Summary

Your IP portfolio is among your organisation's most valuable assets, so effectively managing your innovation pipeline is a critical component of your overall business strategy. Having structured, collaborative processes in place, with stakeholder buy-in across the IP lifecycle, helps you focus on your best ideas and get them to market faster.

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