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AI: THE FUTURE OF PATENT SEARCHING AND THE EPO

At this year's annual EPO Search Matters event, held at the EPO's headquarters in Munich, Germany, EPO examiners provided useful information about many issues, including:
• The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain on search
• Search strategies
• The complexity of searching in particular fields of technology

The event lasted 3 days and covered a several technical fields. The event's program focused heavily on search strategies and techniques used by the EPO.

One of the event's highlights was the opportunity for participants to spend half a day with individual EPO examiners "at-the-desk", to discuss how EPO examiners search in specific technical areas. These sessions provided a unique opportunity to see up close how an EPO examiner performs a patent search in a given technical field.

The event also included a roundtable discussion on the hopes and fears of patent search professionals, and the implications of AI and blockchain technology for patent searching.

The event's lectures and workshops addressed the challenges and complexities of patent searching in a wide range of technical fields such as ICT, automotive and chemistry, with specific emphasis on AI. The topics addressed in the plenary sessions included AI and the search for patent quality – specifically, how AI will change patent search and why this is important; the future directions of searching and searchers in an artificial intelligence era; and patent landscaping methodology, where a case study on blockchain inventions was presented.

The implications of technical character and technical purpose for searching AI-related features were also addressed. Specifically, when searching patent applications with AI-related features, the EPO deems that early consideration of technical character and technical purpose is essential, with respect to both individual features and the patent application as a whole. According to the EPO, since the disclosure of such patent applications is largely of a mathematical/algorithmic nature, this can raise difficulties. Indeed, not all purposes are considered technical; in addition, mathematical/algorithmic features can sometimes contribute to the invention's technical character in conjunction with technical features. The EPO's position is that identifying the contribution of an AI-related feature to the invention's technical character can assist in defining the most suitable search strategy.

The event's participants also had the opportunity to take a closer look at the impact of AI and blockchain on patent searching.

"The EPO recognises the potential that AI holds for patent offices," said EPO President Campinos following the event. *"In the future, AI will be one of several tools that support prior art searching and in doing so, ensure that the quality of our services remains high while improving operational efficiency."*

The topics addressed during the event bear witness to the EPO's constant attention to new technologies and its endeavor to deal with their challenges, so as to ensure that the EPO's searches continue to meet the high standards rightfully expected by the users of the European patent system.