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HOW THE EPO IS HELPING ITS USERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

One of goals of the European Patent Office (EPO) is to support innovation, competitiveness and economic growth across Europe. This goal has become more relevant than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the EPO has been quick to react to the new reality, both by improving its services and by increasing the flexibility of its procedural deadlines. It has also enacted a wide range of other measures to ensure business continuity and to support scientific research, with the institution of a database of the most advanced patent information and knowledge on technologies to combat the virus or treat the disease it causes, helping researchers everywhere to get to grips with the latest inventions.

Partly due to these measures, and notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 the number of patent applications filed at, and the number of patents granted by, the EPO remained stable (180,250 patent applications and 133,715 granted patents). Of course there are some changes in trends, e.g. there is an increase in patent applications in the fields of healthcare, life sciences and digital technologies, and a decrease in the field of mechanical engineering, but the overall filing and grant numbers of the EPO show a balance that reflects the innovation needs of our global society.

Another interesting trend is the geographic origin of European patent applications, with a decrease in applications from companies based in the US, Europe and Japan being offset by continuing growth in applications from companies in South Korea and China. This trend shows that the countries that reacted earliest to the pandemic have gained an advantage in terms of industrial innovation and positioning in the European market. In fact, one of the greatest advantages of filing a patent application at the EPO is that it enables inventors, researchers and companies around the world to obtain protection for their inventions in up to 44 countries through a centralized procedure that requires just one application. Furthermore, the Boards of Appeal (BoAs) of the EPO are always attentive to the needs of users, introducing new rules of procedure and issuing new decisions that reflect the current needs of innovators. All these aspects make the EPO a very reactive Patent Office. And another not-so-secret weapon is that every year the EPO holds a "User Day" to engage with their users on quality, timeliness, and digital user services. This interaction with its users helps the EPO improve its services year after year.

We are living through a very critical period in history, and when this pandemic is behind us we will probably see many changes in the global economic panorama. Those who now invest in innovation and in protecting their intellectual property rights will definitely carve opportunities from this crisis and will dominate the market, and particularly the European market by protecting that innovation at the EPO.