

Nation's Patents System Outdated

ANOTHER thing this country needs is an inventor who can devise a system to keep track of inventions and patents.

Reports from Washington indicate one of the most obsolete bureaucracies is the one that keeps track of new ways of doing things.

It is said little effort has been made to develop a computerized search system for 24 million patents in 100,000 subclassifications on file. Instead, patent documents and drawings are stored in millions of boxes on shelves lining miles of corridors.

A required search of these files for each new application to avoid duplication or infringement of earlier patents takes 18 to 24 months, without assurance of completeness or accuracy.

This could become a great obstacle to the business of inventing. Probably it already is, because other countries are getting ahead of us. In recent years, as many as one-third of all patents issued have gone to non-Americans. Some domestic inventors found foreign imitations

of their ideas on the market here before their patent applications cleared the office in Washington.

Business Week magazine recently reported that a Pennsylvania economist followed up on 48 product innovations, 31 of which were patented. He found that 60 percent of these were imitated within four years, substantially reducing the value of the 17-year patent life.

Because of the difficulty and expense of patenting all new ideas, many firms are relying upon secrecy to protect their new technologies and formulas. Industry spokesmen say that by filing applications for patents, "You're sort of giving them away."

Competitors might be compelled to work harder to learn trade secrets but once they become public, any company can use them. With a patent, a company is assured of 17 years of exclusive use even if a rival company should stumble upon the same idea independently.

The individual inventor — the lone idea man — is not yet an extinct being. Crowds of them gather

occasionally to exhibit their contrivances and swap experiences, but stories of their financial successes don't show up very often. Most inventions and discoveries now come out of large industrial, private or subsidized laboratories.

Almost anything may be patented if it contains a useful new idea, including seeds and plants. Hottest lines for patents right now are drugs and electronics. New ideas are appearing so rapidly that previous ones could become obsolete while the U.S. Patent Office search is going on to see if they have been patented previously. That is why it seems strange that some innovator doesn't come up with an electronic system capable of storing patent information.

The Patent Office doesn't need a new invention to accomplish this. It only needs to discover what present technology is capable of doing in this respect.

If this were done, it might be easier for American inventors to get products on the market ahead of copies by foreign competitors.