

Types of Intellectual Property: Patents

Patents are for inventions. An invention is a product that is new or improved, or a process that can be used in industry. Patents generally cover products or processes that include new functional or technical aspects.

Patents are therefore concerned with how things work, what they do, how they do it, what they are made of or how they are made.

Only very few patents are for entirely new inventions. The vast majority are for improvements in known technology.

Once a patent has been granted, the owner can stop other people from making, using or selling the patented product or process without permission for up to 20 years. It is the owner's responsibility to ensure patents are kept in force by renewal. *An example is James Dyson, the inventor of the bagless vacuum cleaner. His invention was protected for 20 years but now other manufacturers are legally able to produce similar products.*

For an invention to qualify for a patent, it must be new and never have been made public in any way, anywhere in the world, before the date on which an application for a patent is filed. This means that an inventor must ensure absolute secrecy before the patent is applied for.

Patents benefit everyone, not just the inventor. Their publication gives the public advance knowledge of technical developments, which they are able to use freely once the patent expires. Published patent documents are the most comprehensive source of technical information in the world for practically every area of technology. Over 30 million patents can be viewed free of charge on the Intellectual Property Office website (www.ipo.gov.uk).

source: The Intellectual Property Office

This information sheet is one of a series compiled to help students and graduates that are interested in enterprise and innovation. The series is available from our website below.

Need more help?

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