Forms of classification for scientific reasons have been around from at least the Fourth Century BC when Aristotle used a system to classify organisms. Using a classification system for patents has been in practice since shortly after the US patent system originated. At first, it was used to place the models and applications in groups based on general topics, thus allowing examiners and staff to efficiently search.

By 1830, the US established 16 broad classification categories. In 1836, the New Patent Act included the first statutory mention of a patent classification system. It directed the Commissioner of Patents to “cause to be classified and arranged...” the models and applications. By 1878, the number of classes grew to 158.

In the 19th century, other countries also developed patent classification systems. The German Patent Office put a classification system in place in 1825. In 1849, France introduced a system to classify its own patents. In 1870, France and Germany agreed to the use of a joint classification scheme.

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After these advancement leaps, the world had to catch up with Japan and Europe. A new era of patent classification started in 2006 when WIPO announced major IPC reforms.

The US became a major part of the worldwide effort, when in 2010, USPTO Director David Kappos (US) and President Benoit Battistelli (EPO) signed an agreement to form the Cooperative Patent Classification (CPC) system based on ECLA and IPC. In January 2013, CPC was launched.

The US commitment to international classification and creating a cooperative atmosphere has continued since CPC launched. This includes the creation of the Office of International Patent Cooperation (OCIPC) in 2014, which in turn, developed classification divisions that hired numerous patent classifiers and other management experts to help improve and expand CPC and IPC to make them exemplary for worldwide use.

The records of the Patent Office show that almost seven thousand and five hundred different things become subjects of applications for patents. These are frequently found in different subject classifications, according to their literal meaning.

In 1965, the USPTO started developing a cooperative classification system that incorporated online searching and during that same year, Japan went to a paperless office.

Patent Classification Through the Ages

Continued on next page