A VIEW BEHIND THE CURTAIN: The BPAI Decision Making Process

Speakers:
Vice Chief Judge James Moore
Vice Chief Judge Allen MacDonald
Judge Kenneth Hairston
Judge Murriel Crawford
The Board

- The Board is created by 35 U.S.C. § 6, which mandates the Board’s:
  - (1) Duties;
  - (2) Composition;
  - (3) Membership Qualifications; and
  - (4) Panel form of decision-making.
The Board's duties include:

1. Review of ex parte appeals from adverse decisions of examiners where written appeal is taken by dissatisfied patent applicant, and

2. Conduct interferences to "determine priority" (that is, decide who is the first inventor) whenever applicant claims the same patentable invention which is already claimed by another applicant or patentee.
The Board does not “allow” claims of an application and cannot direct an examiner to pass an application to issuance.

Rather, the Board’s primary role is to “on written appeal of an applicant, review adverse decisions of examiners” including the findings and conclusions made by the examiner. 35 U.S.C. § 6.

The Board also has discretion to enter a new ground of rejection. 37 CFR § 41.50(b).
35 U.S.C. § 6(a) establishes the Board's membership as the Director, the Deputy Director, the Commissioner for Patents, the Commissioner for Trademarks, and the Administrative Patent Judges ("APJs")

Original “board of disinterested persons” provided for in Patent Act of 1836

Patent Act of 1861 formed the permanent Board of Appeals of “persons of competent legal knowledge and scientific ability”

President Lincoln appointed George Harding, Esq. of Philadelphia as the first “Examiner-in-Chief”
The APJs shall be “persons of competent legal knowledge and scientific ability” who are appointed by the Secretary of Commerce upon consultation with the Director.

Each APJ has a law degree from an accredited law school and has been admitted to at least one state bar.

Each APJ has at least a bachelors degree in science or engineering or equivalent. Many have advanced degrees in science or engineering or equivalent.
35 U.S.C. § 6(b) requires hearings by 3-member Panels:

“Each appeal and interference shall be heard by at least three members of the Board, who shall be designated by the Director.”

The Director’s authority under 35 U.S.C. § 6 to designate panels has been delegated to the Chief Administrative Patent Judge, Michael Fleming, and in turn to the Vice Chiefs.

Normally, 3-member panels are composed of 3 APJs each involved in the decision-making process.
The Board’s Jurisdiction (35 U.S.C. § 134)

- Final Decisions of an Examiner (“Twice Rejected”)
  - Ex-Parte Appeals: Examiner’s decision rejecting the claims in a patent application
    - Reissue
  - Reexamination Appeals
    - Inter Partes – Patent Owner and Third Party Requestor
    - Ex Parte – Patent Owner
BPAI Structure

- Chief Judge Fleming
  - Oversees all administrative & merits operations
- Merits is split into two Divisions
  - Division 1
    - Vice Chief Judge James T. Moore
    - ~ 40 Administrative Patent Judges
  - Division 2
    - Vice Chief Judge Allen R. MacDonald (Acting)
    - ~ 40 Administrative Patent Judges
BPAI Structure

Division 1 - Vice Chief Judge Moore
- Biotechnology Section
- Computers Section
- Contested Cases Section
- Interference Section
Division 2 - Vice Chief Judge MacDonald (Acting)

- Chemical Section
- Communications/Electrical Section
- Mechanical / Business Methods Section
Each section is divided into plural chambers

Each chamber comprises

- Two APJs
- Two Patent Attorneys
- A Paralegal

FY2010 - Half of APJs are in a chamber

FY2011 - All APJs will be in a chamber
Requirements to Enter Appeals Process

- Application must be twice rejected
- Notice of Appeal
- Filing of an Appeal Brief
- Filing of an Examiner’s Answer
- Filing of a Reply Brief (optional)
- Docketing - transfers jurisdiction to the Board
  - Appeal Number assigned
  - Oral Hearing date assigned, if requested
Standard Operation Procedures (SOP)

- **SOP 1:** Assignment of APJs to Panels
- **SOP 2:** Publication of Opinions and Binding Precedent
The Appeal at the Board

- Assigning a Panel by Chief APJ or Vice Chief (SOP 1)
- APJ Conference
  - Review by the Panel
  - Duties of the Judges
- Oral Hearing (if requested by Appellant)
  - Post-Hearing Conference
- Circulating Opinion
- Signed decision (SOP 2)
Appeals Process: Review by the Panel

- Board is a judicial body reviewing **issues raised by** an Appellant.

- Board’s Findings of Fact must be supported by at least a preponderance of the evidence. *Ethicon, Inc. v. Quigg*, 849 F.2d 1422, 1427 (Fed. Cir. 1988) (explaining the general evidentiary standard for proceedings before the Office).
The Board’s role in an appeal is to, “on written appeal of an applicant, review adverse decisions of examiners upon applications for patents.” 35 U.S.C. § 6(b) (2006) (emphasis added).
appeals process: review by the panel

- (§ 103 example) An appellant may attempt to overcome an examiner’s obviousness rejection on appeal to the Board by submitting arguments and/or evidence to show that the examiner made an error in either (1) an underlying finding of fact upon which the final conclusion of obviousness was based, or (2) the reasoning used to reach the legal conclusion of obviousness.
(Example cont.) Similarly, the applicant may submit evidence of secondary considerations of non-obviousness. *See Kahn*, 441 F.3d at 985-86 (“On appeal to the Board, an applicant can overcome a rejection by showing insufficient evidence of *prima facie* obviousness or by rebutting the *prima facie* case with evidence of secondary indicia of nonobviousness.”) (quoting *In re Rouffet*, 149 F.3d 1350, 1355 (Fed. Cir. 1998), *overruled in part on other grounds*, *KSR*, 550 U.S. at 422).
The panel reviews adverse Examiner decisions for error based upon the issues identified by Appellant, and in light of the arguments and evidence produced thereon. See In re Oetiker, 977 F.2d 1443, 1445 (Fed. Cir. 1992) (“In reviewing the examiner’s decision on appeal, the Board must necessarily weigh all of the evidence and argument.”) (emphasis added). Ex parte Frye, ___ USPQ2d ___ (BPAI March 1, 2010) (precedential) http://des.uspto.gov/Foia/RetrivePdf?system=BPAI&flNm=fd2009006013-02-26-2010-1.
Under 37 CFR § 41.37(c)(1)(vii): appeal brief must include “the contentions of appellant with respect to each ground of rejection presented for review in paragraph (c)(1)(vi) of this section, and the basis therefor, with citations of the statutes, regulations, authorities, and parts of the record relied on.”
Specifically, the Board reviews the particular finding(s) contested by Appellant anew in light of all the evidence and argument on that issue.

Filing a Board appeal does not, unto itself, entitle an appellant to de novo review of all aspects of a rejection.
The Board will not, as a general matter, unilaterally review uncontested issues and aspects of the rejection. *See, e.g., Hyatt v. Dudas, 551 F.3d 1307, 1313-14* (Fed. Cir. 2008) (the Board may treat arguments appellant failed to make for a given ground of rejection as waived).
Thus, the Board will generally not reach the merits of any issues not contested by an appellant. *Cf. In re Baxter Travenol Labs*, 952 F.2d 388, 391 (Fed. Cir. 1991) (“It is not the function of this court to examine the claims in greater detail than argued by an appellant . . . .”).
Duties of Administrative Patent Judge 1

- **Researches the record**
  - Performs legal research to identify law relevant to the potential issues
  - Performs technical review of the record to identify evidence which may be relevant to the potential issues
Duties of APJ 1 (cont.)

- **Conferences** the case with the APJ(s) on the panel, and in conference presents the potential issues, relevant law and evidence

  ♦ For an appeal with an oral hearing, its conference is necessarily split-in-two to first cover items needed to prepare for the hearing and then to cover items that cannot occur until after the hearing.
During the Panel conference, APJ 1 makes **Recommendations** which include:

- **Issues** which the panel should address including any discretionary new ground of rejection under 37 C.F.R. § 41.50(b);
- **Findings of Fact** believed to be relevant to each issue;
- **Principles of Law** believed to be relevant to each issue;
- **Analysis** believed to be appropriate for each issue; and
- **Result** believed to be appropriate for each issue.
At the conference, the Panel makes determinations concerning:

- **Issues** before the panel;
- **Findings of Fact** relevant to each issue;
- **Principles of Law** relevant to each issue;
- Appropriate **Analysis** for each issue; and
- Appropriate **Result** for each issue.
Decision Made in Conference

How the panel should **rule** on each issue:

- Whether or not the Examiner **reversibly erred** with respect to each rejection on appeal raised by Appellant; and

- Whether or not a **new ground** of rejection is appropriate;
  - The Panel is required to unanimously agree on any proposed new ground of rejection.
The Proposed Opinion documents the decision made during the conference

Proposed Opinion includes:

- Findings of Fact
- Principles of Law
- Analysis applying the Principles of Law to the Findings of Fact
- Conclusions of Law
Upon completion of the Proposed Opinion, APJ 1 finally confirms:

- The correct issues are before the panel
- There are no gaps or errors in the Findings of Fact, Principles of Law, and Analysis for each issue
- The correct decision has been made as to whether the Examiner erred in rejecting the claim(s)
- The appropriateness of any new ground of rejection being made
Duties of APJ 1
After Proposed Opinion is Drafted

- APJ 1 then:
  - **Approves** the Proposed Opinion as APJ 1
  - **Notifies** the other APJ(s) assigned to the panel that the Proposed Opinion is ready for their review and approval
Duties of Other APJs

- Upon receiving notice that the Proposed Opinion is ready for review, the other APJs read the Proposed Opinion and confirm:
  - The correct issues are before the panel
  - There are no gaps or errors in the Findings of Fact, Principles of Law, and Analysis for each issue
  - The correct decision has been made as to whether the Examiner erred in rejecting the claim(s)
  - The appropriateness of any new ground of rejection being made
The other APJs then:

- **Approve** the Proposed Opinion, or write a concurring or dissenting opinion
- **Notify** APJ 1 that the Proposed Opinion has been reviewed and is approved for mailing
Patent Attorney Duties

Patent Attorney duties include:

♦ Reviewing the record
♦ Researching case law
♦ Presenting recommendations to the Panel
Patent Attorney Duties (cont.)

- The Panel of APJs makes all substantive **decisions** and **determinations** in view of recommendations

- The Patent Attorney then drafts a proposed decision for the APJs

- All other functions are carried out by the APJs
Oral Hearing Cases

- A **preliminary conference** is held by the Panel before the oral hearing to generally identify the issues.

- A more substantive **final conference** is held after the hearing.
... and Interferences

- Study on the raw numbers of interferences from 1950-2009
- Number of Applications filed
- Number of Reexamination Proceedings
  ♦ Ex-Parte
  ♦ Inter-Partes
- Change in Case Law
- Costs and Risks
Applications Filed

Utility Applications 1950-2009

0 50000 100000 150000 200000 250000 300000 350000 400000 450000

Interferences Declared 1950-2009

The diagram shows the number of interferences declared from 1950 to 2009. The data indicates a general decrease in the number of interferences over time, with significant fluctuations during the period.
Ex Parte Reexamination Requests Granted

- Request grants from 1982 to 2009.
Inter-Partes Reexaminations

Inter Partes Reexamination Requests Granted

0 250 200 150 100 50 0
2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009

2007 2008 2009
Total of All Proceedings

Patentability Challenges at USPTO

- Ex-Parte Reexamination Proceedings Initiated
- Inter-Partes Reexamination Proceedings Initiated
- Interferences Declared
- Total of all Proceedings
Change in the Case Law


  In order for an interference-in-fact to exist, invention A must anticipate or make obvious invention B, and invention B must anticipate or make obvious invention A, thereby meeting both prongs of the 'two-way' test.
Costs and Risks

- Two-Party Interference through Priority
  - Mean Average Costs - $732,000
- Ex-Parte Reexamination Proceeding
  - Mean Average Costs - $14,395
- Inter-Partes Reexamination Proceeding
  - Mean Average Costs (through Appeal)
    - $173,000
- Risks of Claim Loss or Worse in Interference
Conclusion

- Visit Our Web Site for statistics, argument dates, opinions, the interference web portal, standard operating procedures, rules and other information:

  www.uspto.gov/web/offices/dcom/bpai/index.html

- Questions?