Tools for innovation

Patents have always been a valuable source of information for engineers about processes, systems and products but, in the past, it was frequently difficult to obtain the relevant patent documents. The advent of the internet and the fact that patents are not subject to copyright have made patent information much more accessible.

The following three sites provide access to bibliographic patent information and the complete text of many patents.

Some warnings: A thorough search for "prior art" is difficult. If you are seriously considering obtaining a patent, it is probably wise to hire an intellectual property lawyer to help you. In addition, some of the sites mentioned require that you download software (usually for free) to read or print the full text material. Turn to "help" screens for both searching and downloading assistance.

Canadian Patent Database
http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/patents
The Canadian patent database contains patent documents from 1920 to the present time. For patents granted prior to August 15, 1978, the text of the abstracts and claims is not available; bibliographic data and images are available. For patent documents granted since August 15, 1978, bibliographic data, textual data (titles, abstracts and claims) and image data are available.

IBM Intellectual Property Network
http://ibm.com/patents
The IBM Intellectual Property Network lets you search and retrieve nearly four million patent and patent applications documents, including images of all U.S. patents issued after 1974. In addition, you can search and view images from the World Intellectual Property Organization and the European Patent Office (ESPACE-EP-A and ESPACE-EP-B).

European Patent Office
http://ep.espacenet.com
The European Patent Office's site provides access to patent documents worldwide. It comprises four different databases, including patent applications in their original language from the European Patent Office and the World Intellectual Property Organization, patent applications with English abstracts and titles from approximately 50 countries worldwide and Japanese patent abstracts.

There are many internet sites that offer general information about patents and patent searching. An excellent Canadian source is http://www.library.ubc.ca/patscan/about.html.

Reference Department of the University of Toronto's Engineering and Computer Science Library