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Google Boston launches patent R&D project

By Galen Moore

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In the four years since it opened an outpost here, Google Inc. has grown its Boston head count to 200 from five employees. The hiring continues, and Google Boston has become a center of gravity for a handful of R&D projects.

The latest, Google Patents, launched publicly earlier this month, provides search access to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office's complete patent archive, hosted on Google's servers. It's the third in a cluster of projects led out of Cambridge that are putting old media — namely books, magazines and patents — online.

Engineering Manager Jon Orwant leads Google Patents in this portion of the Cambridge office, where a door is wallpapered with the spines of scanned books; and a cast-iron press squats at the intersection of two cubicle clusters.

Orwant joined Google in 2006 from the publishing world, where he was CTO at tech publisher O'Reilly Media Inc. He says he hopes he can expand beyond the USPTO — first, perhaps, to other countries' patent authorities, then to other public documents.

"I think of patents as an example of a broader class of legal document," he said. "Whether it's the privacy policies on our credit cards, or the deeds to our houses, or employment contracts. I think there's a lot that can be done to portray that information in a manner that helps non-lawyers use it and understand it and navigate it better."

Orwant declined to say how many people work on Google Patents. For now it's a small project, he said, compared with Google Books.

However, the service is affecting Boston's IP-heavy legal industry, where it's part of a trend toward eliminating the middle man in patentability searches, said attorney John Anastasi, a partner at Lando & Anastasi LLP in Cambridge. "You have all these search firms that do searching for you. You used to use them extensively. Now you can turn around on your desktop and do keyword searching."

When a patent's legitimacy is questioned, however, a Web search is far from adequate, said David Brody, a litigator at the Concord firm Hamilton, Brook, Smith & Reynolds PC. "If it's necessary to study the interpretation of claim language — the proper scope of a claimed invention — this doesn't avoid the problem of having to go to the patent office to get all the history on a claimed patent," Brody said.

A Google spokesman said the company plans to expand the documents it offers via the USPTO, but declined to discuss specific plans.

Google officials say they don't hire people for specific projects: The company wants its engineers to be doing something different every 18 months. But Orwant does keep a wish list of skills he needs to hire — including "wizards" at the programming language JavaScript, as well as engineers skilled in storage and computing infrastructure, and machine learning.

"We want people who are passionate about something," he said. "The books team here is big enough that I can take people who are passionate about machine learning or passionate about the infrastructure side and use them equally."

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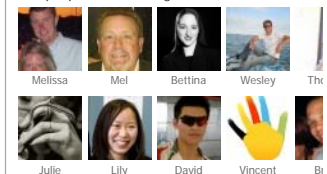
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