



One of the offices of the European Patent Office. © dpa/picture alliance via Getty I

Trade union: 'Culture of burnout and exhaustion' at European patent office in Rijswijk

There is cake and there are speeches by ministers and a president, but under the garlands things are brewing during the festive anniversary of the European Patent Office in Rijswijk, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary. Staff are calling attention to "a culture of burnout". It would also lead to bad patents and thus problems for companies.

At the offices of the European Patent Office, there is "a culture of burnout and exhaustion caused by excessive workload". It leads to staff making more mistakes in drafting patents for new inventions. And that, in turn, can lead to companies ending up more often in legal proceedings over those new inventions.

That is the summary of a cry of alarm recently posted online by the Patents Office's internal union. The European Patents Office (also known as the Patent Office) has 6300 employees, offices in Rijswijk, Munich, Berlin, Vienna and Brussels, a budget of 2.5 billion and handles all applications for new patents (aka patents) for 44 European countries.

The huge, European organisation celebrates its 50th anniversary on Thursday, with Dutch Economic Affairs Minister Micky Adriaansen speaking and video messages from German Chancellor Scholz and European Commission President Von der Leyen, among others.

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Employee European Patent Office

But things are brewing under the party garlands, according to the union's message. "Staff feel rushed, employees have to assess more and more applications for patents in the same time," one staff member, who wishes to remain anonymous, tells this site. It is no longer about quality, but about quantity, says the employee. This also jeopardises the four-eyes principle. "There is less and less time to check with your colleague whether an assessment is correct."

While quality is just so important. The Patent Office received almost 200,000 patent applications last year. These range from someone who has designed a bicycle tyre that cannot go flat, to a small, exclusive part of a highly specialised machine. If the inventor gets a patent, other companies are not allowed to simply copy the product.

Bad patents cause problems

And that, the employee argues, is where things risk going wrong. "Bad patents are being issued, causing companies to make things that someone else already has a patent on. That way, the patent system could be at risk."

That claim appears to be supported by Beat Weibel, vice president at electronics giant Siemens. He cites a group of companies, including Ericsson, Siemens, Nokia and Bayer, that complain about the Patent Office. 'Companies put more and more time into accurately describing a patent, while the office takes less and less time to review it,' he writes on LinkedIn. According to him, in 90 per cent of the appeals lodged with the office, the granted patent is (partially) reversed 'because of issues that should have already been apparent during the initial assessment'.

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Trade union

The uproar at the Patents Office is remarkable. Only seven years ago, staff also raised the alarm. Back then, there was a culture of fear under the previous director, Frenchman Benoît Battistelli. The Frenchman was replaced in 2018 by Portuguese António Campinos, who started his second five-year term last summer. 'The atmosphere of fear that existed under the previous director has certainly changed, but a culture of burnout has taken its place,' the union writes.

A spokesman for the Patent Office said it would not respond to staff complaints before the anniversary celebrations. In reactions earlier this year, management members said they "do not recognise the image that quantity comes before quality".



António Campinos, director of the European Patent Office. © European Patent Office

Cyril Rosman 04-10-23, 20:49 Last update: 21:38