

User satisfaction survey of  
the search services  
of

The European Patent Office  
The Spanish Patent Office  
The Swedish Patent Office

in the fields of

Electrical Machines  
Human Necessities  
Audio & Video Media  
Electronics  
Computers

The Hague, March 2003  
R.Heijna  
European Patent Office

## Table of contents

---

Table of contents		
1	Introduction	1
1.1	Background	1
1.2	Analysis	2
1.3	Ranking	2
2	Evaluation on general aspects	3
2.1	General background of the respondents	3
2.2	Quality criteria for EPO/OEPM/PRV search services	5
2.3	Overall level of satisfaction	6
2.4	Satisfaction on general aspects of search services	6
2.5	Satisfaction on specific aspects of prior art searches	7
2.6	Satisfaction on communication aspects	8
3	Evaluation on specific search files	10
3.1	Satisfaction of specific prior art searches on specific dossiers	10
3.2	Specific aspects: specific dossiers and 12 months rating	10
3.3	Satisfaction on specific aspects of specific dossiers	13
4	Additional comments	14
4.1	PCT procedure	14
4.2	Community Patent	15
4.3	Documents cited	16
4.4	Improvements	16
5	Conclusion	18

# 1 Introduction

---

## 1.1 Background

Since the advent of the partnership between the European Patent Office (EPO), The Spanish Patent Office (OEPM, Oficina Española de Patentes y Marcas) and the Swedish Patent Office (PRV, Patent- och Registreringsverket) for the execution of international searches it had become desirable to extend the user satisfaction surveys that had until then be done for EPO search services only, to OEPM and PRV search services. In this way valuable feedback from the user community comes available for the three partner offices.

The EPO commissioned ITM Research in Amsterdam to carry out a telephone survey for search services of the EPO, the OEPM and the PRV in various industrial sectors in parallel.

This report is a summary of the results for the three offices which are described more in detail in the individual reports pertaining to the technical fields and the individual Patent Offices (not all EPO reports yet available at the time of writing this summary report).

It has been necessary to combine the results for the five sectors Electrical Machines, Human Necessities, Audio & Video Media, Electronics and Computers in order to arrive at numbers big enough be able to draw conclusions at an acceptable level of reliability.

If the results are used for comparison, there are some methodological caveats that should be taken into account:

- OEPM and PRV searches surveyed are international searches only whereas EPO searches surveyed are also European ones and searches for National Offices;
- OEPM international searches are predominantly requested by Spanish-speaking applicants and PRV international searches are predominantly requested by applicants from Nordic countries. EPO searches on the other hand do not have these characteristics;
- The number of respondents involved was sometimes still rather low which renders any conclusions on the aspects concerned less firm.

Consequently, any differences in the results may find their explanation at least partially in possible differences in the procedure in the framework of which the searches are done or in possible general differences in opinion in populations of respondents in different countries.

Below some relevant aspects of the methodology are described; the methodology is described in full in the individual reports.

## 1.2 Analysis

In the full individual reports the results are analysed for possible explanations based on the different country groups of the respondents, whether they are applicants or professional representatives, and a multiplicity of search/application variables.

In this summary report these analyses have largely been omitted. The reader is referred to the individual reports for these explanations.

## 1.3 Ranking

Respondents are asked to rank their satisfaction of particular aspects of search services on a five-point scale:

- very good (5)
- good (4)
- satisfactory (3)
- poor (2)
- very poor (1)

In all surveys, it is important to understand what the respondents mean when they choose the mid-point of the scale. The attribution 'satisfactory' could mean just that, or mildly displeased, genuinely satisfied, etc., depending on the population of the respondents. ITM Research and the EPO employed several well-proven methods to determine what was meant by the mid-point 'satisfactory' and came to the conclusion that it was actually associated with a 'poor' rating. For the current survey this association was assumed to remain applicable. Therefore only the users who answered 'very good' or 'good' are counted as genuinely satisfied users.

## 2 Evaluation on general aspects

---

All respondents were asked to answer some general questions about their background and about the EPO/OEPM/PRV search services.

### 2.1 General background of the respondents

To be able to categorise the respondents they are asked some questions about their position within the organisation (Tables 1 and 2) and their level of experience with the search services (Table 3).

Table 1. Position within organisation, applicants.

Applicants	EPO	OEPM	PRV
Inventor	16%	14%	8%
Senior executive	16%	7%	2%
Head of R&D	11%	4%	13%
Head of Patents and Licensing	11%	4%	12%
In-house attorney	13%	4%	9%
Searcher	6%	7%	1%
Administrative (secretary,formality officer)	4%	10%	1%
Head of Legal Department	2%	0%	1%
Head of Documentation	1%	0%	1%
Other	20%	50%	52%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Number of respondents	980	28	146

A relatively high proportion of respondents in the OEPM and PRV surveys could not yet be clearly allocated to one of the pre-defined categories since the open ended answers still have to be 'coded'. After coding the percentages will probably change but it is assumed that the conclusions will then not be affected in a significant way.

Table 2. Position within organisation, attorneys.

Attorneys	EPO	OEPM	PRV
Attorney	64%	14%	23%
Attorney and partner\director	17%	17%	4%
Administrative(secretary,formality officer)	4%	3%	1%
Head of Documentation	2%	3%	0%
Searcher	1%	0%	6%
Other	12%	63%	66%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Number of respondents	792	36	71

Table 3 shows the level of experience of applicants and attorneys with the EPO/OEPM/PRV search services. In all three samples some 30% of the respondents see themselves as very experienced in working with the respective Patent Office. About 40% claims to be at least 'well experienced'. The levels of experience between the different groups of respondents are quite comparable.

Table 3. Level of experience with search services.

	EPO	OEPM	PRV
3-Very experienced	31%	30%	31%
2-Well experienced	35%	43%	40%
1-Not so experienced	25%	22%	24%
0-Not experienced at all in working with EPO	9%	5%	5%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Number of respondents	1772	64	217

## 2.2 Quality criteria for EPO/OEPM/PRV search services

The first question with regard to the quality criteria has been designed to get spontaneous reactions from the respondents on what they consider to be key aspects that determine the quality of the search services. The respondents have been asked to name three criteria they regard to be the most important.

Of the 2053 respondents, 1873 mentioned at least one criterion search services should meet. On average the respondents mentioned 2,7 criteria. On the basis of the answers that were given 8 major quality aspects emerge (% of respondents):

Table 4. Criteria the search services should meet.

	EPO	OEPM	PRV
Timeliness	47%	8%	41%
Thoroughness	74%	14%	43%
Coverage	54%	6%	66%
Clarity	21%	14%	15%
Costs	8%	2%	8%
Consistency	6%	0%	10%
Communication	8%	5%	4%
Non-Patent Literature (NPL)	4%	2%	5%
Other	12%	45%	36%
Number of respondents	1627	47	199

Users of EPO search services considered Thoroughness the most important aspect, followed by Coverage with Timeliness on a close third place. For users of OEPM search services Thoroughness was also most important but Clarity was considered equally important. User of PRV search services considered Coverage the most important, followed by Thoroughness and Timeliness on a close second and third place.

The aspects of Costs, Consistency, Communication and Non-Patent Literature were not considered to be very important by any of the user groups.

## 2.3 Overall level of satisfaction

All respondents have been asked to rate their overall satisfaction with search services over the previous twelve months according to the aforementioned five-point scale. Of the 2053 respondents, 1914 were able to give an answer on this question.

The majority of the respondents, able to answer the question, is satisfied with the search services EPO/OEPM/PRV provide. More specifically, 50 - 60% considers these services as 'good' and around 15% even as 'very good'. According to a minority the services are just 'satisfactory'. Only a small minority is outspoken negative about the search services: 6% qualifies these services as 'poor' and 1% as 'very poor'.

Table 5. Overall satisfaction with search services.

	EPO	OEPM	PRV
5- Very good	17%	12%	15%
4- Good	50%	64%	51%
3- Satisfactory	25%	17%	29%
2- Poor	6%	7%	5%
1- Very poor	1%	0%	2%
Average	3.8	3.8	3.7
Number of respondents	1659	59	196

On average, the scores given are 3.7 and 3.8 out of 5 which is close to 'good' which is the rating for genuinely satisfied.

## 2.4 Satisfaction on general aspects of search services

The satisfaction with the EPO/OEPM/PRV search services is also measured on a variety of general aspects selected to cover the relevant topics. The respondents are asked to give their opinion on the following aspects:

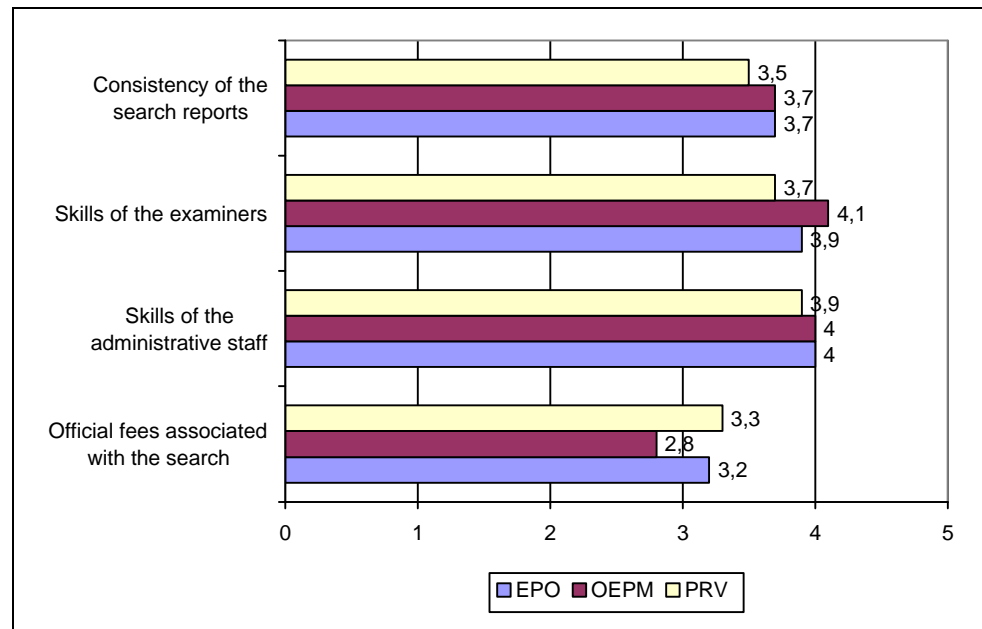
- Consistency of the search reports
- Skills of the examiners
- Skills of the administrative staff
- Official fees associated with search

The results in Figure 1 show that these aspects are evaluated mainly positively. The overall picture is that the users are well satisfied with the skills of the examiners, in particular those in the OEPM. Skills of the administrative staff are also well appreciated.



As could be expected, satisfaction levels with the official fees are ranking lowest, in particular with users of OEPM search services.

Figure 1. Satisfaction with general aspects of the search services



## 2.5 Satisfaction on specific aspects of prior art searches

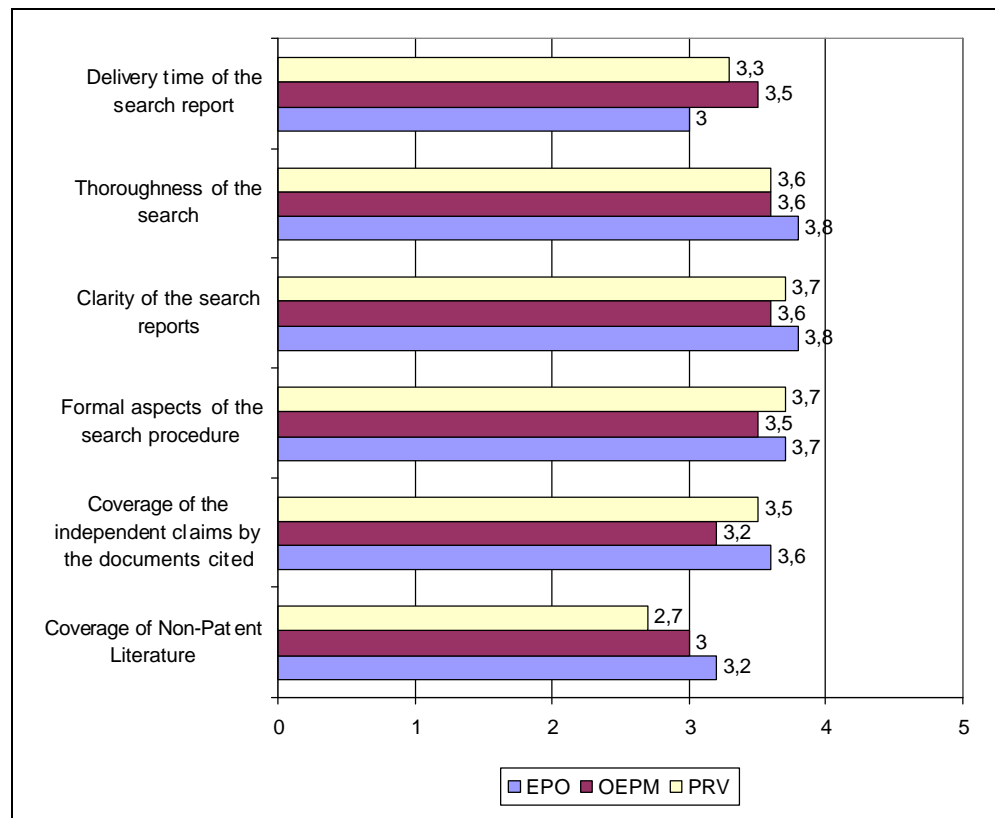
The respondents were first asked their opinion on an aspect over the previous 12 months and subsequently, if they had indicated to have the specific file at hand, their opinion on that aspect in relation to the specific file.

First now the results concerning respondent's opinion over the last 12 months are shown.

The respondents rated the following specific aspects:

- Delivery time of the search report
- Thoroughness of the search
- Clarity of the search reports
- The formal aspects of the search procedure
- The coverage of independent claims by the documents cited
- The coverage of non patent literature.

Figure 2. Satisfaction with specific aspects of search services.



The respondents are most satisfied with the Thoroughness of the search, Clarity of the search report and the Formal aspects of the search procedure. Respondents are relatively most satisfied with the Delivery time of the search report for searches done by the OEPM and Coverage of Non-Patent Literature is best appreciated in searches done by the EPO. On average however, delivery time and coverage of NPL show room for improvement.

## 2.6 Satisfaction on communication aspects

Next, the respondents were asked to give their feedback on aspects of communication.

The following aspects have been evaluated:

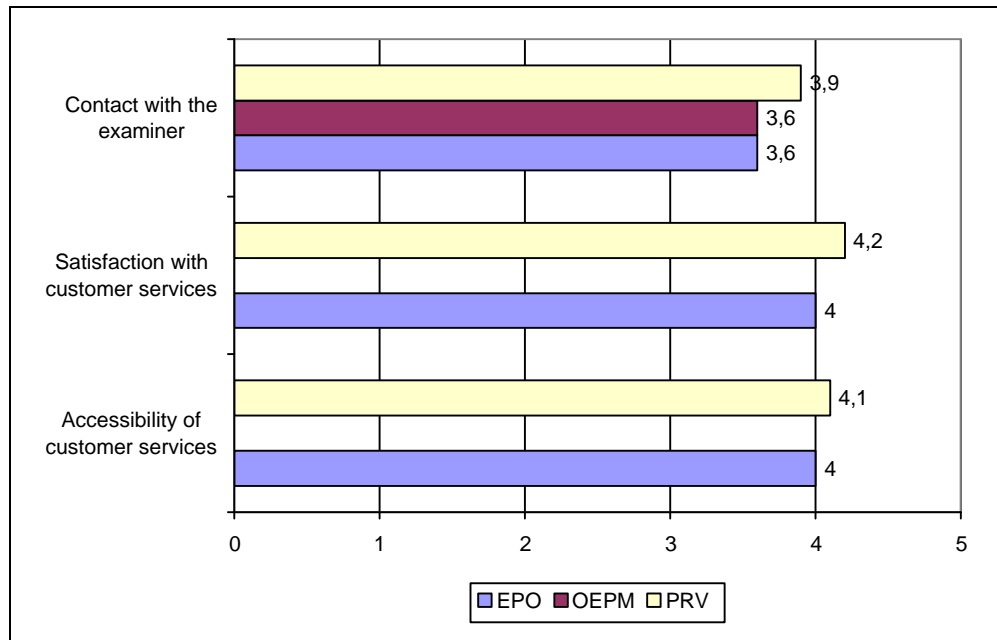
- How would you rate the contact with the examiner?
- Overall satisfaction with the customer services
- The accessibility of the customer services.

All the respondents were asked to evaluate the contact with the search examiner while the other aspects are evaluated by the respondents with experience with the Customer Service.

Of the users of EPO search services 54% could answer the question on contact with the search examiner; for OEPM as well as PRV this was 64%. Experience with Customer Services was a rather low 28% for EPO users and 46% for PRV users. None of the OEPM users gave an answer to this question.

As figure 3 shows a general appreciation of 'genuinely satisfied' regarding communication aspects apart perhaps from contact with the EPO and OEPM examiners for which the rating is just below that level.

Figure 3. Satisfaction with aspects related to the communication



From all the respondents the majority would like to be able to contact the examiner between the moment of application and the search report. This is felt relatively the least by EPO users: 54%, a bit more by PRV users: 58% and the most by OEPM users: 63%.

### 3 Evaluation on specific search files

#### 3.1 Satisfaction of specific prior art searches on specific dossiers

The respondents were first asked their opinion on an aspect over the previous 12 months and subsequently, if they had indicated to have the specific file at hand, their opinion on that aspect in relation to the specific file.

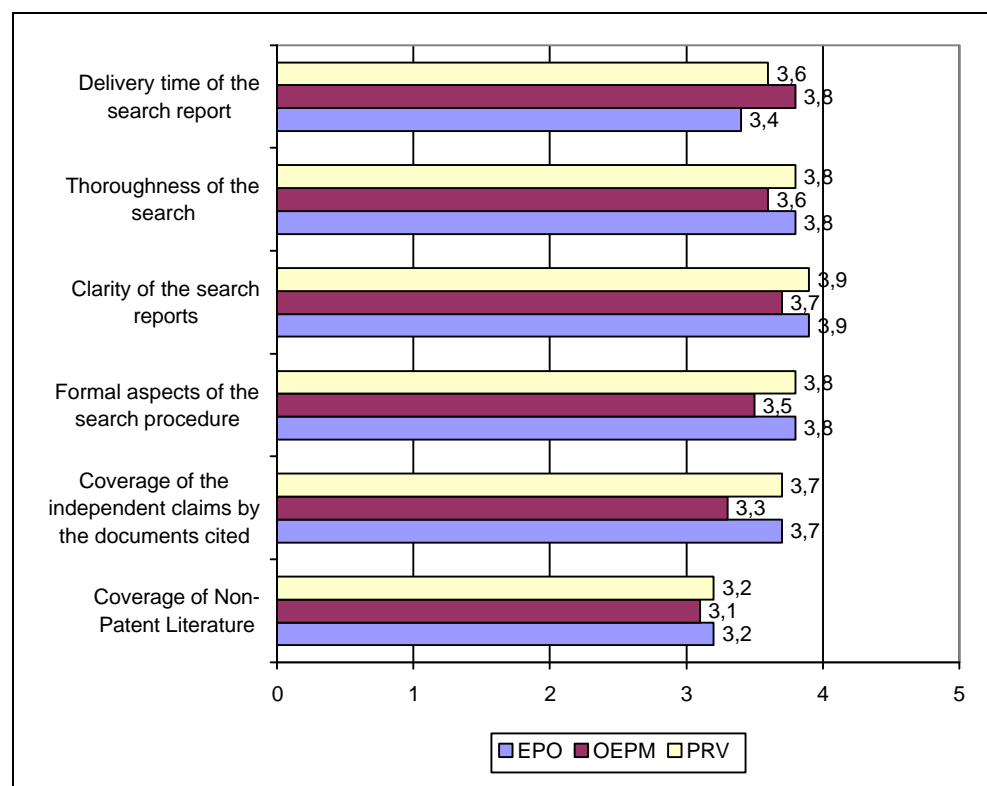
In a next series they were asked questions that can only be answered on the specific search file, of course only if they had earlier indicated that they were prepared to answer questions on the specific file.

Of the EPO respondents 55% were able to evaluate specific dossiers (975 out of 1772), of the OEPM respondents 69% (44 out of 64) and of the PRV respondents 44% (95 of 217).

#### 3.2 Specific aspects: specific dossiers and 12 months rating

Figure 4 below shows the rating of specific aspects now given based on a specific file rather than over the last 12 months:

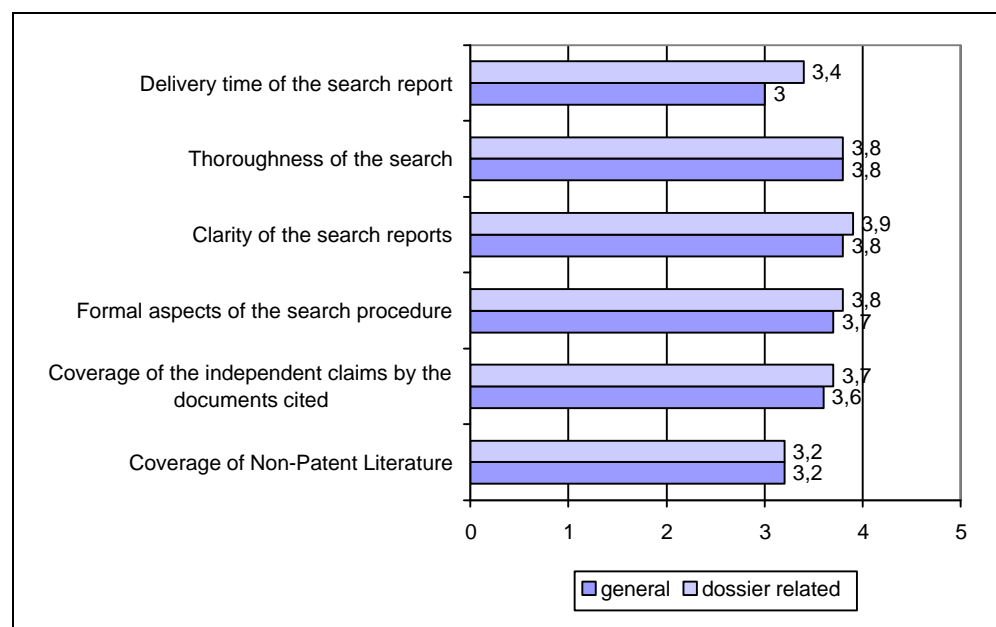
Figure 4. Satisfaction with specific aspects of the specific file



Rating specific searches respondents are most satisfied with the Thoroughness of the search, Clarity of the search report, Formal aspects of the search procedure and Coverage of the independent claims by the documents cited. Respondents are relatively most satisfied with the Delivery time of the search report for searches done by the OEPM and less satisfied with the Coverage of NPL in the searches of any the Offices.

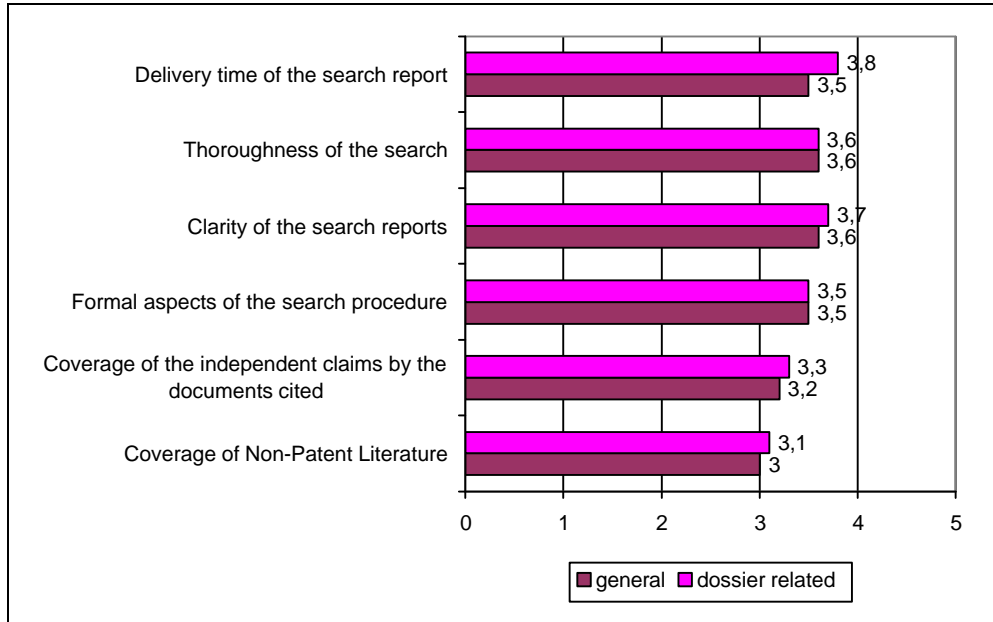
As can be seen in the following figures, differences between general and dossier related evaluations are marginal. As a whole, it seems that dossier related evaluations tend to be slightly higher than general ones. This should be concluded with care, since there is a possibility that these figures have influenced each other to a high extent.

Figure 5. Differences between evaluations for EPO searches



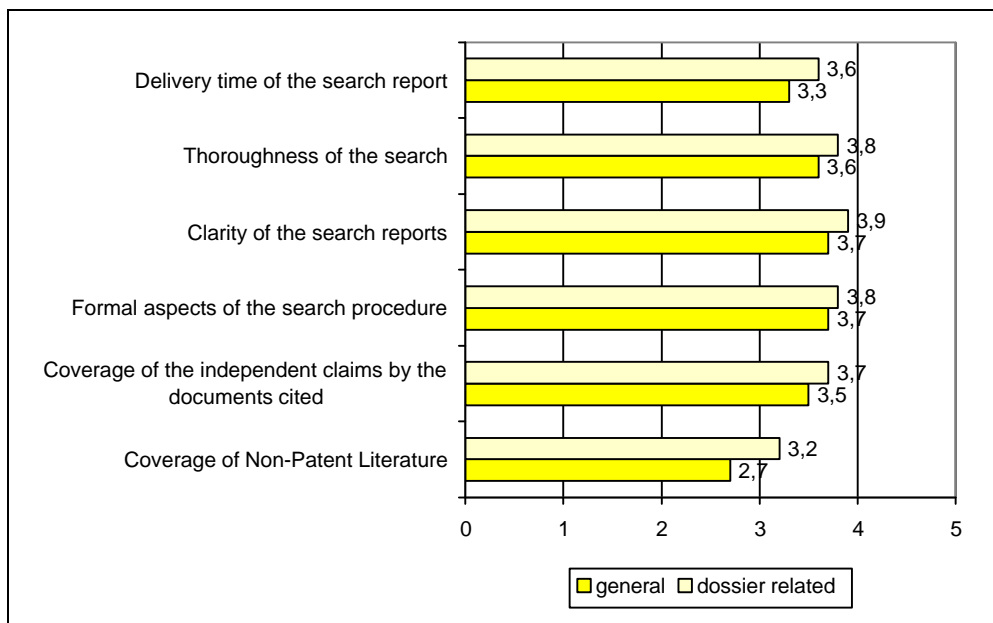
For EPO search services the ratings based on actual files are slightly more mildly on the aspect of Delivery time, but just not in the 'genuinely satisfied' region. The general impression however does appear to be worse than the assessment of actual cases.

Figure 6. Differences between evaluations for OEPM searches



Also for OEPM services the rating of Delivery time is better on the specific files; in those actual cases it is close to 'genuinely satisfied'.

Figure 7. Differences between evaluations for PRV searches



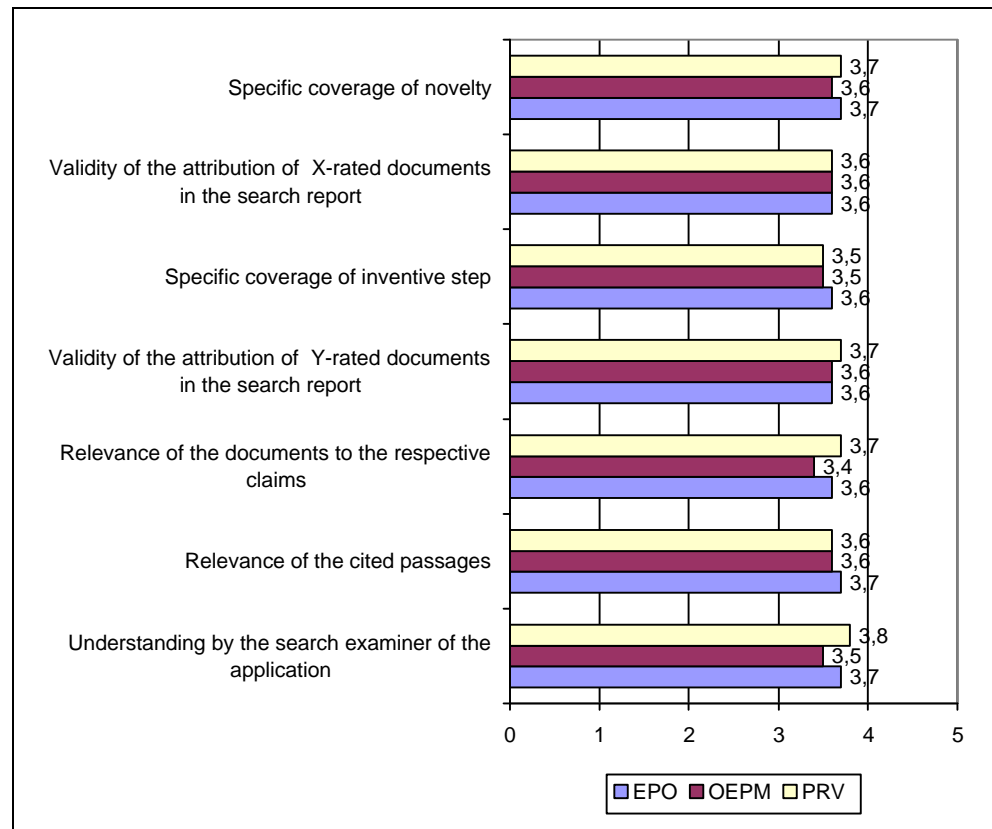
For PRV search services all ratings based on actual files higher than those based on the preceding 12 month period. In particular the aspects of Delivery time and Coverage of NPL are rated quite better on the specific searches.

### 3.3 Satisfaction on specific aspects of specific dossiers

Next, specific aspects that could only be rated on the basis of the specific search file are shown. As mentioned before, not all respondents were able to answer questions on the specific file: 55% of the EPO respondents (975 out of 1772), 69% of the OEPM respondents (44 out of 64) and 44% of the PRV respondents (95 of 217).

The results are shown in Figure 8:

Figure 8. Satisfaction with specific aspects related to the search report



Ratings are all grouped quite closely together: between 3.4 and 3.8 for all aspects among all three Offices. Within this range, the specific aspects of 'Relevance of the documents to the respective claims' and 'Understanding by the search examiner of the application' were particularly satisfying for the respondents rating PRV searches.

## 4 Additional comments

---

### 4.1 PCT procedure

With regard to PCT (Patent Co-operation Treaty) the respondents have been asked to give their opinion. Of the EPO respondents 78% were of the opinion that the PCT procedure has advantages or disadvantages compared to other procedures. For OEPM respondents this was 86% (100% of those who gave an answer) and 76% of PRV respondents thought there is a difference. For each of EPO, OEPM and PRV some 15% of respondents did not express an opinion.

Asked to explain their answer more in detail, higher percentages of respondents did not answer: 36% of EPO respondents, 67% of OEPM respondents and 84% of PRV respondents. The answers of the remaining respondents break down as follows:

Table 6. PCT procedure

---

	EPO	OEPM	PRV
Advantage in:			
Costs	7%	7%	4%
Delivery time	10%	7%	12%
Procedure	58%	66%	76%
Communications	1%	0%	0%
Disadvantage in:			
Costs	1%	0%	0%
Delivery time	5%	0%	0%
Procedure	7%	20%	4%
Communications	1%	0%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Number of answers	1015	15	25

---

---

Respondents for all three Offices are clearly in favour of the procedural aspects of the PCT and mainly because of the possibility to defer costs and to obtain more time for further decision.

Yet, it is also the procedural aspect with which respondents indicate negative experiences.



## 4.2 Community Patent

The intention to introduce the Community Patent – offering patent rights for all EU member states from one application – is known to 73% of EPO respondents, 88% of OEPM respondents and also 88% of PRV respondents.

The introduction of the Community patent would modify filing practice according to 61% of EPO respondents, 41% of OEPM respondents and 67% of PRV respondents.

Asked to explain their answer more in detail, relatively high percentages of respondents were not able to do so: 57% of EPO respondents, 78% of OEPM respondents and 81% of PRV respondents. The answers of the remaining respondents break down as follows:

Table 7. Comments on Community Patent

	EPO	OEPM	PRV
Simplify filing procedure	32%	8%	15%
Lower fees	25%	0%	15%
Recognition/acceptance	18%	31%	20%
Uniform standard	10%	8%	7%
Other	15%	54%	43%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Number of answers	660	13	46

For users of the EPO search services a simpler filing procedure is the most important expectation of the advent of the Community Patent, for users of OEPM search services and PRV users it is the expected better recognition (the number of answers from OEPM users is very low, so the conclusion is not very firm).

Among the answers in the category "Other" there are a non-negligible number of expectations that fees will be higher rather than lower, which leads to the conclusion that perhaps it is not yet sufficiently clear what the Community Patent will bring.

### 4.3 Documents cited

A question asked to all respondents is whether one finds the number of documents cited in the search report over the past 12 months satisfactory. Most of the respondents reacted positively to this question; 87% for EPO and PRV users and to a somewhat lesser extent the OEPM users: 72%.

The respondents who had indicated that they could answer questions based on the specific search file were also asked to rate this on the specific file; the ratings for this aspect were less than the general ones: 82 % for EPO and PRV users and only 64 % of OEPM users.

Where dissatisfied the users were mainly so because they considered the number of documents to be too few.

### 4.4 Improvements

Subsequently respondents were asked on which of the aforementioned aspects the search services could be further improved.

Not all respondents gave an answer to the question. Of the EPO respondents 73% answered the question (1295 of 1772), 34% of OEPM respondents (22 of 64) and 57% of the PRV respondents (123 of 217).

The respondents that did answer gave more than one answer on average: EPO respondents 2.6 answers on average, OEPM respondents 1.9 and PRV respondents 2.1 answers.

The percentages of the categories of answers are shown overleaf in Figure 9. Not shown is the category 'None' that had been given by 6 % of EPO respondents (none for the OEPM or PRV) indicating that the respondent thought none of the aspects mentioned earlier in the survey is in need of improvement.

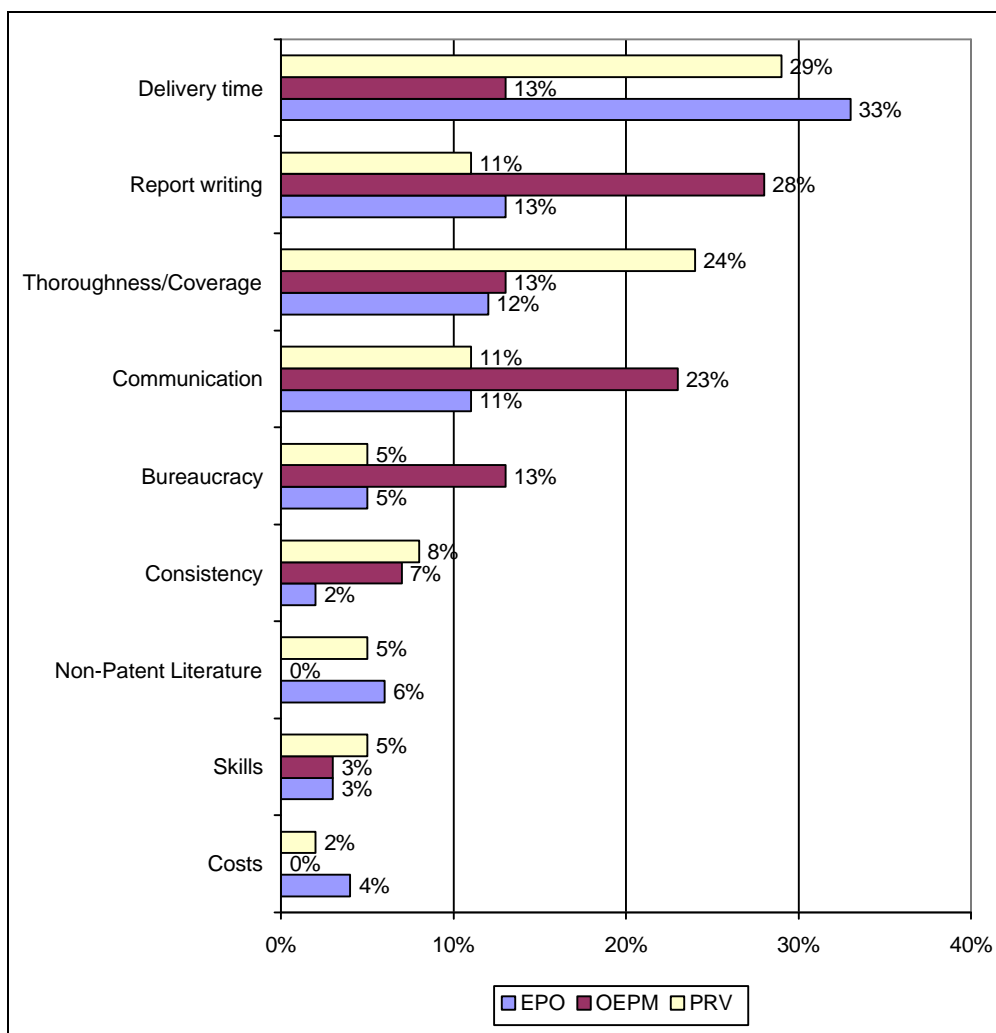
Also the category 'Other' received only answers from EPO respondents (5%) this category is also not shown; by consequence the percentages for the answers from the EPO users add up to 89% instead of 100%.

For the users of the search services of all three Offices Delivery time is a clear candidate for improvement, though to a much lesser extent of OEPM users.

For EPO users Report writing, Thoroughness/Coverage and Communication all come on second place for improvement and the other aspects were not so often seen to be in need of improvement but still Non-Patent Literature and Costs were considered more often than with the OEPM and PRV users.

For OEPM users Report writing and Communication are of first importance with Delivery time, Thoroughness/Coverage and Bureaucracy on second place for improvement.

Figure 9. Suggestions for improvement of search services



PRV users like EPO ones see room for improvement in Delivery time, but also Thoroughness/Coverage was often mentioned. On second level of importance Report writing and Communication were indicated.

## 5 Conclusion

---

The users of the search services of the European Patent Office (EPO), The Spanish Patent Office (OEPM, Oficina Española de Patentes y Marcas) and the Swedish Patent Office (PRV, Patent- och Registreringsverket) in the fields of Electrical Machines, Human Necessities, Audio & Video Media, Electronics and Computers have been asked questions about their perception of these services.

The results are comparable for many aspects of the services, with some exceptions for one or the other aspect where user of the services of one of the Offices have different opinions.

The time span between filing the request for search and receipt of the search report (Delivery time) appears to be of high concern for all respondents in particular for those asked their opinion of EPO and PRV services.

Considering all topics rated it would appear that the respondents rating EPO search services are on average slightly more satisfied than the respondents rating PRV search services. Respondents rating OEPM services also appear to be less satisfied than EPO respondents, slightly less also than PRV respondents on average over all aspects rated.

In this kind of comparison however it has to be borne in mind that there are several reasons why the ratings could be difficult to compare:

- OEPM and PRV searches surveyed are international searches only whereas EPO searches surveyed are also European ones and searches for National Offices. In previous surveys the ratings from EPO respondents on international searches have always been higher than those on other ones;
- OEPM international searches are predominantly requested by Spanish-speaking applicants and PRV international searches are predominantly requested by applicants from Nordic countries. EPO searches on the other hand do not have these characteristics;
- The number of respondents involved was sometimes still rather low, in particular for OEPM searches. Thus for some ratings the confidence band is so wide that the opinion of the population can not be concluded from the sample interviewed;
- The numbers of examiners in the OEPM and PRV are markedly smaller than in the EPO consequently their degree of specialisation in a technical area is smaller.

It is hoped that the results from the survey will allow for a better insight in the user perception of quality and in the needs of the user community and last but not least to help the EPO, the OEPM and the PRV to improve their search services.