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(54) Title: SYSTEM FOR PROVIDING BUSINESS INFORMATION		
<p>(57) Abstract</p> <p>An apparatus, method and data structure for communicating business information, including outsourcing information. Contractors provide information regarding their products and services into the system (170). Outsourcing companies search a database (220) containing contractor information (230) to determine which contractors meet a particular search criteria. Selected contractors receive project information (240) and, optionally, a bid template (270). Bid information is supplied to the system. The system prepares a table of bid information that is sent to the outsourcing companies for review. Evaluation information relating to contractors and outsourcing companies is obtained from both outsourcing companies and contractors and is provided to outsourcing companies and contractors as part of the bid and project information.</p>		

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SYSTEM FOR PROVIDING BUSINESS INFORMATION

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates in general to an apparatus, method and data structure for providing business information, including outsourcing information, to assist businesses in meeting their needs for providing and obtaining a variety of services. More particularly, the invention relates to an apparatus, method and data structure for facilitating communications between contractors and outsourcing companies that include marketing and search mechanisms, bid management, contractor and outsourcing company assessment, and other various features.

Recently, businesses have turned increasingly to outsourcing work that would be either cost-prohibitive to do in-house or outside of their primary business. Because most outsourcing companies currently use only a few, select contractors with whom they have close ties, significant inefficiencies exist that result in a glut of smaller firms not having access to these outsourcing companies. Further, outsourcing companies are denied competitive pricing due to a limited pool of contractors and occasionally have difficulty finding qualified applicants to perform highly skilled work.

Businesses can also use a middleman or broker to aide their procurement of services. A broker's success is highly dependent on access to market information regarding various goods or services. Although brokers can procure goods and services at reasonable rates and can save time for outsourcing companies, brokers are expensive and their expertise is typically limited to a particular industry or a limited number of industries. To the extent that buyers and sellers of goods and services have access to market information, they can procure goods and services at market; however, gaining such access is a time-intensive activity.

Buyers and sellers can also use umbrella firms to outsource various projects. Umbrella firms seek to establish a contractual relationship with outsourcing firms, who are generally searching for six- to thirty-six-month contracts. The umbrella firms profit by receiving contracts and distributing the contracts to the firms working under their umbrellas. Often, the umbrella firms provide some traditional business services such as bookkeeping, accounting, and billing to the other firms under the umbrella.

The deficiencies associated with past methods, including the use of brokers and umbrella firms, are that they are time intensive, utilize slow processes, draw from a limited pool of contractors, are expensive, and are inefficient.

The foregoing demonstrates that there is a need for an invention which greatly
5 reduces the time required to identify and procure services, improves pricing due to substantial competition, and accomplishes these goals at competitive prices.

The invention also relates to an apparatus, method and data structure for providing business information, including job posting information, to assist businesses in meeting their needs for providing and obtaining a variety of services. More
10 particularly, the invention relates to an apparatus, method and data structure for facilitating communications between potential employers and potential employees that include marketing and search mechanisms, application and job posting management, employer and employee assessment, and other features.

Recently, businesses have turned increasingly to use of databases, such as those
15 found on the Internet, to post job opportunities and/or positions available for both temporary and longer-term needs. The known processes lack a manner by which an employer can readily screen job applicants and whereby potential employees can easily obtain information relating to the assessment of particular employers. Additionally, a job seeker is unaware of jobs that are posted on a database after the job seeker conducts
20 a search of the database.

The foregoing demonstrates that there is a need for an invention which allows an employer to efficiently identify suitable job applicants and permits applicants to assess multiple positions and employers and to receive updates regarding new job postings.

25 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The invention satisfies the need and avoids the drawbacks of the prior art by providing an apparatus, method and data structure that set forth an interactive venue for firms of all sizes, both to showcase their talent and to identify contractors meeting their outsourcing requirements. Outsourcing companies may be provided with access to a
30 network of independent contractors, both in order to find new business and to contract work out. Access to this network condenses the process of locating and hiring independent contractors from weeks or months into an afternoon. In addition to the

time savings associated with the procurement of services, the invention provides cost benefits in that the existence of a substantial pool of available contractors eliminates the inflated billing rates that may result from a lack of competition. Due to the economies of scale for business information, the invention can accomplish the above goals at a competitive cost. The invention also offers an assortment of databases to enable firms to locate information and solutions to an abundance of business problems and opportunities.

According to one aspect of the invention, an apparatus for and a method of communicating outsourcing information between an outsourcing company and a plurality of contractors are set forth. The apparatus and method may include the structure for and steps of logging onto an on-line database by each of the plurality of contractors, inserting contractor information into a plurality of requisite fields in a form provided by the on-line database by each of the plurality of contractors, and storing the contractor information in the on-line database. A user—such as an outsourcing company—may conduct a search on the on-line database for outsourcing information using skill criteria and may select a subset of contractors to receive outsourcing information associated with the outsourcing opportunity. The system may then preferentially transmit the outsourcing information and a bid form to the subset of contractors, accept bid information from a further subset of contractors, place the bid information in a report, and send the outsourcing company the report or an address identifying the location of the report on the database to permit the outsourcing company to compare and contrast the bid information received from the contractors.

The outsourcing company may limit its search to a specific universe of contractors or may choose to simply identify all contractors meeting its search criteria. System users, including contractors and outsourcing companies, may provide an assessment of a project, contractor or outsourcing company by entering information into an evaluation form which may be accessed by future users. The apparatus and method may include assigning passwords to users to allow future use of the system and the option of entering a sales associate identification number so that sales commissions may be tracked.

In another aspect of the invention, a system for communicating outsourcing information between an outsourcing company and a contractor contains a computer-

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