

How to work with your engineering colleagues

How should you work with engineers to ensure you capture and protect your company's innovations? Julie Dunnett's answer is simple: "You need to get your tentacles out there."



Julie Dunnett

Dunnett, GKN's director of IP (pictured, left), was speaking yesterday at Managing IP's Women in Leadership Forum in London. She explained how an important part of her work at the aerospace and engineering company is overseeing training programmes for engineers that are designed to educate and enthuse them about IP.

"You want to be thought of as part of the engineers' work processes," she said. But they need to be reminded often about the importance of capturing and protecting IP rights – a big challenge for a company with 50,000 employees in more than 30 countries.

"If you tell them about an IP issue then they are really, really with you – for a month or so," she said, advocating an octopus-like approach to ensuring the IP message reaches the whole company.

Alexandra Brodie of Wragge Lawrence Graham & Co, who moderated the session, summed it up: "You need to engage, talk, get people onside and then you need to do it all over again." The pair discussed the challenges of encouraging engineers to report technological developments that may be patentable to their IP colleagues.

Brodie said that in her experience, engineers fell into one of two categories. In the first are those who believe that "surely everyone knows this stuff" and that their work cannot possibly be patentable. "These people are a bit too clever by half," Brodie said. In the second group are those who regard reporting their potentially patentable breakthroughs as a chore that they try to avoid.

If there is a risk that engineers over-report rather than under-report IP, it is one Dunnett said she was happy to accept. "My policy is that everything that is submitted that isn't inventive is a wonderful opportunity for education."

Incentives

Dunnett explained GKN's approach to incentivising engineers to report patentable innovations. "The easy answer is cash reward. But what is also very important is recognition within the company." But she warned IP lawyers to be sensitive to local cultures when devising reward programmes.

"If you want to offer anything beyond cash – which you need to marry with local legal requirements – you need to check that it is perceived as an added extra in that country. Americans tend to like plaques and award dinners. In my experience the Japanese don't want those."

Dunnett also responded to a question from the audience as to whether people sometimes claim credit for inventions that may not be theirs. It can be an issue, she agreed, particularly for companies that frequently acquire and dispose of business units and which need to work hard to develop a close-knit community. "You need to be aware of the risk and ask questions," she advised. "Especially when there are rewards and status on offer."