

TSUG, the Thomson Scientific User Group in the UK

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Abstract

The forerunner to the UK-based Thomson Scientific User Group (TSUG) was formed in 1990 as a professional interest group for patent information searchers using Derwent patent abstracts and related products. Although discussion and activities still revolve around this area, the group today also exchanges information on and searching experience with any other patent-related information products of interest and relevance to members. The group and its members maintain close links with Thomson Scientific for the purposes of product development and product evaluation.

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Keywords: TSUG; Thomson Scientific User Group; Derwent; Patent searching

1. Origin and objectives

For younger readers, it's important to know what the patent searching and information landscape looked like nearly 50 years ago. From its own beginnings, Derwent provided the only comprehensive (for its day) patent coverage service, concentrating on pharmaceuticals, agrochemicals and polymers/plastics. Without Derwent, in those days, patent searching was a laborious process indeed. From 1970, general chemistry was added to the portfolio (to produce the Chemical Patents Index or CPI) coupled with rapidly increasing country coverage. In 1974, so-called non-CPI technologies (electrical, mechanical, etc.) started to be covered. Access to the full data was, and still is, by 'subscription only'.

As a recognised organisation, the Thomson Scientific User Group started life as the Derwent UK User Group (DUKUG) with its first meeting kindly hosted by Rhone-Poulenc at Dudbrook Hall in 1990 with 23 attendees. This

followed discussions between Yves Dubosc (Rhone-Poulenc, France), Neil Walden (Rhone-Poulenc, UK), Subramaniyan Narayanaswami (affectionately known to all as Swami, from Pfizer) together with other active UK-based subscribers, and took into account a desire to focus more specifically on the needs of UK customers and users. The well known at the time 'Derwent Subscriber Meetings' had spawned the creation of several 'subscriber groups', usually aligned with subject matter, although some 'national' user groups, notably in France and Germany, had already been formed. (Until several years ago, there were two-way contacts with user groups in France and Japan but the ever-increasing time pressures and frequent changes of group members on all sides have, sadly, seen a temporary halt to these worthwhile international activities).

These 'subscriber groups' were generally a success but the subscriber group members and 'subscriber representative' were not always the main users of Derwent products. Hence there was seen the further need for a 'users group' for those with daily 'hands-on' experience, who could discuss the technical and content issues of working with and using the actual patent information.

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Accordingly, the remnants of the UK Subscriber Group (then exclusively subscribers to Farmdoc and Agdoc – now sections B and C in the Chemical Patents Index) transformed into DUKUG, picking up many new members along the way, although a number of founding members still attend the meetings today.

Since April 2005, the group has been called the ‘Thomson Scientific User Group’ (TSUG) in succession to the ‘Derwent UK User Group’. This was done purely to reflect the change in name and trading status of the former Derwent organisation.

The TSUG is an informal and friendly UK-based group of predominantly patent information professionals who are major users of Thomson Scientific products and services. The group enjoys a good relationship with Thomson Scientific but does include within its remit discussion of other sources of patent and scientific information.

Apart from appropriate name changes, the group’s objectives have remained unaltered since inception and include:

- To provide a regular forum (with meetings once or twice per year) to discuss issues and exchange experiences relating especially to use of Thomson Scientific products and services.
- To formulate, implement and follow up agreed strategies for communication on matters of mutual interest to Thomson Scientific and TSUG members (and their employing companies, as appropriate), ultimately to benefit Thomson Scientific, its customers and users.
- To discuss other patent information related matters, in particular their implications for Thomson Scientific products and services.
- As a group of professional searchers, to be pro-active in the monitoring and improvement of patent data and quality.

2. Membership

The user group is unusual in being an informal one from the beginning. Members join in a personal capacity but can, and do, attend as company representatives. There is no ‘corporate membership’ but most members are employed in the patent and/or information departments of major UK companies involved in industrial research. In addition, we have members working in the UK Patent Office and those working in their own consultancy. Members working in any areas of technology are welcome to join although those from engineering are currently under-represented. Originally, it was open to anyone whose company was a Derwent subscriber but in reality we welcome any Thomson Scientific users whether they are subscribers or not.

The informal set-up is reflected by the fact that we have no membership fees and therefore no income, no financial assets and no treasurer. Currently, we have about 25 members from 16 companies or organisations

and we rely successfully on the generosity of our various employers, in rotation, to make a room available for our meetings, which are usually held twice a year, in spring and in autumn. Our members take pride in the group and are able to demonstrate to their employers the benefits of taking part.

Over more than 15 years, we have seen how our jobs (and job titles!) have changed even though the basic type of work is substantially unchanged. In that time, the tools of the job have developed almost out of recognition.

3. Activities, past and present

As a group of dedicated users of Thomson Scientific information, we are keen to suggest, initiate or support improvements to Thomson Scientific services. At our inaugural meeting in 1990 we discussed the launch of Derwent Patents Preview (a competitor to the other relatively new patent alerting system from Current Patents, ‘Patent Fast-Alert’) and we already had suggestions for improvements, which were passed on by our then chairman, Jim Sibley. At that same meeting, we were pleased to hear of the project whereby the Australian Patent Office would be digitising Derwent abstracts. Derwent’s ‘Geneseq’ product was in its early stages of development and several DUKUG members were involved in evaluations.

In 1991 we started to explore the new Markush DARC service and using the DUKUG forum we were able to compare it with Marpat (CAS) and MPharm (INPI). We even speculated that the limited market might only be able to support one Markush system but competition still thrives. As a further sign of those times, it must also be noted that the World Patents Index file was not yet available on the STN host.

By 1992 detailed discussions had begun between Derwent and a number of the companies represented by our members on the topic of moving away from the ‘subscriber model’. This and the possible consequences for our companies and for Derwent/Thomson Scientific have occupied a significant part of many DUKUG meetings. The Derwent/Thomson Scientific challenge was (and still is) how to make a successful transition for major users from a ‘subscriber-only’ model to something different that represents a gain for both sides.

Two hosts of Derwent databases, Questel and Orbit, merged in 1993 and that led to discussions and assessments on the impact to the users. Just 12 years ago, our experience of the internet was very limited with little to interest us as patent searchers. At a 1994 meeting, one group member commented that she was using the internet or e-mail ‘almost daily’ to communicate with Derwent! Today of course, internet sources of patent information are as indispensable as Derwent abstracts were 20 years ago.

Throughout the patent information user community, there was serious concern a few years later over the possibility that Derwent would close down sections of their manual coding in favour of using the more recently devel-

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