

User survey says USPTO should permit customers to turn off the automatic log-out from EFS-Web and Private PAIR

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Summary

USPTO designed EFS-Web and Private PAIR so that customers are logged out after a period of inactivity, approximately an hour. As it turns out, for the vast majority of respondents, this is a bug, not a feature. More than 90% of respondents find this feature neither important nor valuable. If USPTO were to change the system so that each user could choose for a particular login session to never get logged out automatically, 81% of respondents would use the feature sometimes or for all or nearly all of their login sessions.

Recommendation

USPTO should change EFS-Web and Private PAIR so that the user can choose for a particular login session to never get logged out automatically.

Details

Oppedahl Patent Law Firm developed a survey about the effect on users of the automatic log-out feature of EFS-Web and Private PAIR. The survey was publicized to several listservs for patent practitioners. Ninety-five responses were received. (If you would like to receive a copy of the raw data, contact OPLF.)

Who were the respondents? The respondents were heavy users of both Private PAIR and EFS-Web. Fifty-two percent of respondents use Private PAIR five or more days of each week. The fraction of respondents using Private PAIR at least three days a week adds up to 76%.

As for use of EFS-Web, thirty-eight percent of respondents use EFS-Web five or more days of each week, while forty-nine percent use EFS-Web at least three days a week.

Respondents were asked this question:

How many patent applications does your workplace (you and co-workers if any) file through EFS-Web, on average, in a year?

Fifty-two percent of respondents said their workplace files 101 or more patent applications through EFS-Web. The percentage of respondents filing at least eleven patent applications per year through EFS-Web added up to ninety-five percent. Eighty percent of respondents reported that their workplace handles 101 or more active patent applications or patents in Private PAIR.

Sixty-one percent of respondents work at a private patent firm with two or more registered patent practitioners. Fourteen percent work in a corporate patent department. Another eighteen percent are solo registered practitioners. Five percent work in a private general-practice firm with a patent department.

Is there a problem that needs fixing?

There is a wise saying “if it ain't broke, don't fix it!” So a first inquiry is whether there is a problem that needs fixing. The answer turns out to be “yes”. Respondents were asked “do you ever try to do something in Private PAIR or EFS-Web and find that you must log in again because you have been logged out by the portal?”. Seventy-seven percent of respondents (73 persons) said this happens “every now and then” or “frequently”. Those seventy-three persons were then asked how often this happens. The answer is that it happens three or more times a day to 27% of respondents. It happens at least once a day for all seventy-three persons.

The automatic log-out sometimes puts customers into a situation where they cannot simply log in again. Instead, they must go to the extra step of "signing off the authenticated session" before they can log back in again. Forty-four percent of respondents reported that this happens at least once or twice a day.

Could it be, in the face of all of this, that lots of respondents nonetheless find the automatic log-out feature to be important or valuable? Only eight percent of respondents said the feature was important and valuable. The other ninety-two percent of respondents said no, the feature was neither important nor valuable.

The small handful of respondents who said the feature was important and valuable were then asked why it was important and valuable. One respondent said:

PAIR keys are shared. Since they only allow 2 log ins at a time, someone might be waiting to complete a filing while I may have been pulled in another direction.

This respondent was apparently under the mistaken impression that if two persons log in with a particular user login, then this will block a third person from logging in with that user login. In fact there never has been a technical reason limiting the number of simultaneous logins to “two”, only a licensing limitation. About a year ago USPTO remedied the licensing limitation. This means there is no need to force one user to log out as a precondition for another user to be able to log in.

What customers want?

Ninety-two percent of respondents find the automatic log-out feature neither important nor valuable. If USPTO were to change the system so that each user could choose for a particular login session to never get logged out automatically, 81% of respondents would use the feature sometimes or for all or nearly all of their login sessions.

The survey then asked:

If USPTO were to change Private PAIR and EFS-Web so that you could pick the time period for automatic logouts, would you use the feature and if so, what time period would you choose?

The responses were:

no, I would rarely or never use the feature	24%
yes, and I would set it to some period shorter than one hour	2%
yes, and I would set it to some period between one and four hours	28%
yes, and I would set it to some period between four and eight hours	11%
yes, and I would set it to last until the scheduled end of my work day	20%
yes, and I would set it to the longest available time period	15%

The alert reader will appreciate that it is not very consistent that a full 24% would rarely or never use a feature of a user-selected auto-log-off time period, and yet only nine percent even thought the auto-log-off feature was important or valuable. Re-reading the sequence of questions as originally presented in the questionnaire suggests that the explanation for the 24% may be that readers were assuming for this question that the feature of the *previous* question (the ability to shut off the auto-log-off function completely) was already available. If the ability to shut off the auto-log-off function were available, maybe a user would find no need for an additional feature of picking the time period for auto-log-off.

Another way to look at the 24% figure may be that some of the “no” respondents were indirectly saying they would not use an auto-log-off feature at all.

In retrospect our sense is that this question and its responses were not worded as well as they should have been. Perhaps the most that can be made of the responses is that a substantial fraction of users would prefer to *pick* the time period for auto-log-offs (and would pick a time period much longer than one hour) rather than having the time period fixed by USPTO at one hour.

Conclusion

By a wide margin, respondents would prefer that they be permitted to choose for a particular login session to never get logged out automatically.