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Updates on three recent columns

By DAVE LIEBER

Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Let's get caught up with the latest developments on three recent column subjects.

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Patent office fights ID theft

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office has worked to protect inventors from becoming victims of identity theft.

Spokesman Richard Maulsby credits a July 24 Watchdog column for the changes.

"You started all of this," he says. "You're the first person that brought this to my attention."

The column detailed how easy it is for identity thieves to search the Internet for personal data on inventors that reveals their income-tax returns, medical records, credit-card reports and bank statements.

The patent office has begun going through billions of documents on public file to eliminate personal information, he says. It's a job they're likely to never finish, but at least it's on their radar.

Inventors are now warned not to disclose the information in their applications and other documents through notices on the agency's Web site, in other written materials and in public meetings.

Inventors are also asked to alert the agency to any personal information that has been filed so it can be deleted.

"We have done everything we think is possible," Maulsby says.

The problem could also plague other government agencies, he says.

"Now, with the availability of information through the Internet, it makes it all that much more accessible," he says. "This has certainly raised the consciousness of this agency."

This situation was brought to the attention of The Watchdog by David Brown, a Florida inventor. Brown is still fighting the patent office on the issue. But he says he is pleased with the progress made so far.

"Freedom of the press is a wonderful concept to get officials to obey the law!" he wrote The Watchdog. "I thank you for what you did, as do all inventors."

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Dave Lieber's Watchdog column appears Sundays and Fridays. (817) 685-3830
watchdog@star-telegram.com