

US patent awards: Where has all the innovation gone?

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IBM doesn't have a close contender when it comes to snagging patents in the US. However, a glance at the line-up reveals a somewhat jarring state of affairs: 23 of the top 35 companies awarded US patents in 2008 are not US companies. Does that mean America has lost its innovation edge?

IBM received nearly 4,200 patents in 2008 from the United States Patent & Trademark Office, making Big Blue the undisputed king of the intellectual property game for the 16th year running.

A closer look at US patent numbers collated by IFI Patent Intelligence reveals something else: More and more international companies made efforts to protect their intellectual property in the US than ever before.

In the No. 2 spot behind Big Blue is Korean consumer electronics giant Samsung, which was granted just north of 3,500 patents by the American patent authority last year. And in the No. 3 spot? Japanese camera maker Canon, which secured more than 2,100 US patents.

Indeed, 23 of the top 35 companies granted US patents in 2008 are based in other countries. American companies took only four of the top 10 slots.

It may seem that this points to a decline in the long tradition of American innovation and ingenuity, but the issue is more nuanced than that.

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