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Yesterday, before filing an appeal brief, which requires identification of the real party in interest, I needed to verify the current assignee of a published application, which I filed and for which I am attorney of record.

Because assignment information for patent applications is no longer available from the electronic filing system, I looked at the information available through Assignment Center. The assignment I filed from the inventors to the original assignee (for which I have a notice of recordation) is not listed in the Assignment Center records, which means that the information provided by Assignment Center is incomplete and unreliable.

I sent an e-mail to the Assignment Center "help" e-mail address, gave them the application number, stated that I am attorney of record (which they could have verified), and requested that they send the assignment records for the application to me. Here is what they wrote back:

"Thank you for contacting the Assignment Recordation Branch.

Unfortunately, we are prohibited from providing any specific Assignment information in a patent matter. Please be advised we are unable to launch the attachments you provided.

We also understand the Assignment tab in Patent Center has been temporarily disabled by the EBC. However, they have recently implemented a new procedure for applicants wishing to have certain assignment information added to their non-public patent application(s) viewable in Patent Center Private View. Form, SB469, is now available on the USPTO website or Patent Center home page (see attached).

Finally, if you're in need of a copy of the Assignment documents, before the case is available for public inspection. You may purchase a copy by contacting the Patent and Trademark Copy Fulfillment Branch (PTCFB) at 571-272-3150.

We hope this information is helpful."

Reader, this information was NOT helpful.

As an initial matter, I did not attach anything to my e-mail, so I do not understand why they would include the statement that "we are unable to launch the attachments you provided."

Additionally, the application is not "non-public," so I shouldn't need to file SB469.

Most importantly, however, is that even if I were to file SB469, I assume it would just cause the incomplete information in Assignment Center to be made available in Patent Center, so really the only option that might work is the last one, namely paying for the real, and presumably complete, assignment records (even though it is not "before the case is available for public inspection").

In order to do what I needed to do yesterday, I had to contact the client to ask them to confirm the real party in interest. And they, blissfully unaware of how bad the USPTO's electronic systems have become, probably wondered why I was bugging them instead of just checking the USPTO's assignment records.

And how is one supposed to verify chain of title for a patent or published application that is owned by a third party? I was only able to do what I needed to do because I have a relationship with the original assignee.

In sum, what was formerly a 30-second, one-person task has ballooned into a two-person (or more) task that may require additional papers to be filed (which may or may not work). It now takes longer not only in actual time spent but also in total time required from start to finish (due to response time lags).

What a joke. How bad are things at the USPTO that they cannot even provide accurate patent ownership records?