

Product Development and the Timing of Information
Disclosure under U.S. and Japanese Patent Systems

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Received May 13, 1994; revised March 2, 1995

Aoki, Reiko, and Prusa, Thomas J.—Product Development and the Timing of
Information Disclosure under U.S. and Japanese Patent Systems

This paper examines the consequences of the differences in the timing of information disclosure between the U.S. and Japanese patent systems. Under the Japanese system it is possible for a firm to apply for a patent, knowing the exact specifications of a rival's patent *application*. In contrast, in the United States the only way a firm learns about a rival's innovation is upon the actual granting of the rival's patent. We argue that this difference enables Japanese firms to coordinate their R&D efforts better than their U.S. counterparts and that this, in turn, leads to smaller quality improvements under the Japanese system. We show that the creation/diffusion tradeoff of patents can be influenced not only by the scope and length of patent protection but also by other features of the patenting process. *J. Japan. Int. Econ.*, September 1996, 10(3), pp. 233-249. State University of New York at Stony Brook; and State University of New York at Stony Brook, Rutgers University, and NBER. © 1996 Academic Press, Inc.

Journal of Economic Literature Classification Numbers O34, O31, K00.

* We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership and the Suntory Foundation. Aoki thanks the Institute for Social and Economic Research at Osaka University for their hospitality where preliminary work on this paper was done. We thank John Hillas, Akio Sakai, and an anonymous referee for helpful suggestions. Thanks are also due to Shoji Saigo and Sukenori Nojo of the Japanese Patent Office.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the United States is still the world's R&D leader, concerns have grown over the quality, quantity, and content of U.S. R&D, especially in comparison with Japanese R&D. Particularly noteworthy was the recent National Science Foundation report (1992) that highlighted differences in U.S. and Japanese R&D patterns and concluded that there were still many important differences in U.S. and Japanese R&D patterns. Among its many findings, the NSF report suggests that the R&D of many Japanese firms tend to result in relatively minor or incremental improvements, a result consistent with findings of other empirical studies.¹

A number of explanations have been put forth for understanding the differences between U.S. and Japanese R&D—interest rates and tax treatment, antitrust laws, and the nature of government are among the most widely mentioned. However, little attention has been paid to the differences in the intellectual property protection systems of the United States and Japan. In a broad sense, the goal of this paper is to begin to address this shortcoming by studying how institutional differences between patent laws can give rise to differences in the R&D decisions of U.S. and Japanese firms. More narrowly stated, the purpose of this paper is to examine the consequences of differences in the timing of information disclosure between the U.S. and Japanese patent systems.

In particular, we focus on the amount and timing of credible information disclosed during the patent application review process and argue that disclosure can have a significant effect on a rival's R&D investment. Our argument relies on the fact that the patent examination process takes a significant length of time—often upward of seven years. In fact, the review process is sufficiently lengthy that a rival firm can develop a competing product during the time the original product is being examined.

Under the Japanese patent system the patent application is publicly disclosed or “laid open” 18 months after the filing date, i.e., the Japanese practice of *kokai*. All key information contained in the patent application is automatically published in the *Patent Gazette*. Furthermore, the Patent Office's examination as to the substance of the application normally does not *begin* until after the public disclosure (Someno and Someno, 1977; Doi, 1988).² By contrast, in the United States information contained in a patent

¹ For example, *Business Week* (1993) reports a recent study by CHI Research that used U.S. patent citations to conclude that R&D conducted by U.S. firms had the largest “technology impact.” The Japanese used the single-claim filing until 1975. Some of the patents in the study would date prior to 1975. One could argue that the single-claim system is responsible for the appearance of incremental improvements.

² Prior to the laying open of the application the patent examiner's typically only verifies whether the application complies with technical formalities, e.g., whether all documents and drawings are complete, and whether the appropriate fees have been paid (Someno and Someno, 1977).

application is published in the *Official Gazette of the United States Patent and Trademark Office* only after the patent has been granted.

We show that this procedural difference leads Japanese firms to make smaller improvements in quality than they would under the U.S. system, and therefore plays a role in explaining observed differences in U.S. and Japanese R&D. Unlike what is expected from a simple spillover argument, we show a firm is better off if it is able to reveal its information. We also show that consumers and producers differ in their opinion about the quality changes induced by the disclosure rules: industry profits are higher under Japanese rules but consumers prefer the U.S. rules.³

Although the main focus of this paper is to analyze the differences in U.S. and Japanese patent systems, our results also relate to existing industrial organization literature on information diffusion and patents. A key difference in our work is the emphasis on coordination issues while authors such as Scotchmer and Green (1990), Gallini (1992), and Matutes *et al.* (1992) emphasize spillover and policy characteristics such as length and breadth of protection.

In the next section we sketch a model of vertical quality differentiation. In Sections 3 and 4 we characterize equilibria under the two systems. We compare the systems in Section 5. In Section 6 we discuss extensions to our model and robustness of our results. We make a few concluding comments in Section 7.

2. THE MODEL

Our insight about the important differences in the disclosure rules can be made most simply in a two-player R&D game. We imagine that there are two identical firms, 1 and 2, who compete against one another in a common market. Under either patent system, once the patents are approved, the firms compete for sales, implying that there are two stages of competition between the firms. The first stage involves the R&D investments (and quality choices) while the second stage involves the firms simultaneously announcing their prices and consumers then deciding which product (if either) to purchase. The model is solved backward for the subgame perfect equilibrium.

We interpret the differences in the disclosure rules as inducing a different

³ The information disclosure rules of U.S. patent system imply that differences in patent application dates must be quite large before one firm's patent application influences its rival's behavior; therefore, under the U.S. system it is often not sensible to distinguish between the first or second filer. In contrast, in Japan the laying open of the patent application occurs quite early relative to the overall length of the patent review, making the notion of first versus second filer relevant in a wide range of cases.

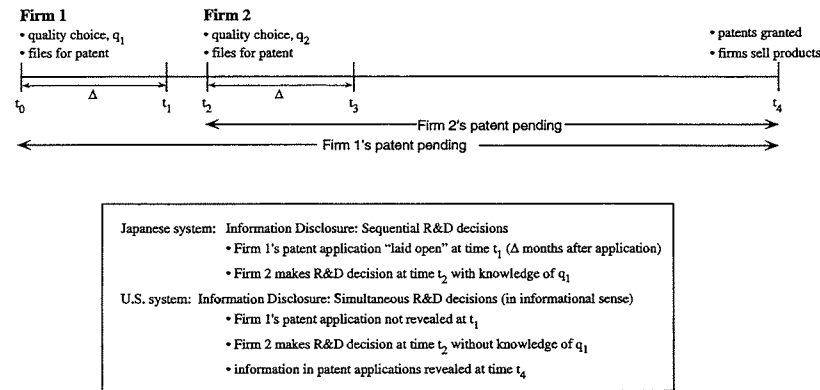


FIG. 1. The timing of information disclosure.

informational structure for the R&D decisions. Figure 1 depicts how the disclosure requirement is interpreted in our model. Without loss of generality, we assume that at time t_0 firm 1 makes its quality choice and files for patent protection. After an initial review period (Δ months) information contained in the patent application may or may not be published (at time t_1), depending on the patent system. If firms are competing under the Japanese system, the application is laid open, and firm 2 who is still developing its product can adjust its R&D to better compete against firm 1's quality. In contrast, if firms are competing under the U.S. system, the information in firm 1's patent application is not published, implying that firm 2 still does not know firm 1's quality. We assume that, under either system at time t_2 , firm 2 finalizes its quality choice and files for patent protection. Finally, after the (typically) lengthy patent review process both firms receive patents and compete against one another in the market (time t_4). Thus, the Japanese practice of laying open patent applications leads to a sequential quality investment game while the U.S. patent system induces a simultaneous quality choice game.

Before proceeding to solving the model, we note two assumptions that are implicit in the model. First, it is conceivable that due to the differences in the filing dates the firms might receive their patents sequentially and thus reach the product market sequentially. This potential difference in the time the products reach the market will be insignificant as long as the length of time that both products are patented is relatively large as compared with the time that only one of the products is available, as we assume is the case. Second, we assume that profit will be zero if a firm fails to innovate. In general, a firm would have an existing product that it could

sell if it does not engage in R&D. Thus, our model should be interpreted as capturing R&D incentives in a new market.

Equilibrium of the Second Stage

In a model with vertically differentiated quality, given two products of different qualities sold at the same price, *all* consumers unambiguously rank one quality as being better than the other.⁴ Suppose, for example, the product we are considering are automobiles and the quality dimension is safety; all consumers agree that a safer automobile is the higher quality (superior) product. In our model, if the same price is charged for both type of autos, then only the safer model will be purchased. It follows that the inferior product will only be purchased if its price is low enough to compensate for its lower quality.⁵

Therefore, if both high and low quality products have positive sales, consumers must be "heterogeneous."⁶ In order to capture this heterogeneity we assume that there is a continuum of consumers indexed by α which are uniformly distributed over the interval $[0, 1]$. Higher α values reflect the consumer's higher valuation of quality. A type α consumer will get a surplus of $v_\alpha(q, p) = \alpha q - p$ if he buys one unit of product of quality $q \in [0, \infty)$ at price $p \in [0, \infty)$.

At the second stage, given the available quality and price combinations, a consumer will buy one unit of a product if the surplus is (i) positive and (ii) greater than the surplus from consuming the other product. Given our assumptions one can show that there is a unique pair of equilibrium prices (and quantities sold) associated with each pair of possible qualities, implying that the equilibrium sales revenue can be expressed as functions of quality choices alone.⁷

For simplicity, we assume that there is no cost of second-stage production, allowing us to write the revenue for firm 1, $R_1(q_1, q_2)$, as

$$R_1(q_1, q_2) = \begin{cases} \frac{4(q_1)^2(q_1 - q_2)}{(4q_1 - q_2)^2}, & \text{if } q_1 \geq q_2, \\ \frac{q_2 q_1 (q_2 - q_1)}{(4q_2 - q_1)^2}, & \text{if } q_1 < q_2. \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

⁴ See Gabszewicz and Thisse (1979), Shaked and Sutton (1982), and Aoki (1988) for more detailed discussions of vertical quality differentiation.

⁵ This contrasts to a model with horizontally differentiated products, where each consumer has a most preferred quality which implies, in general, that different consumers prefer different products. An example of horizontal quality differentiation is automobiles with different colors.

⁶ Heterogeneity may be due to differences in reservation prices or differences in consumers' willingness to pay for quality.

⁷ All proofs are available upon request.

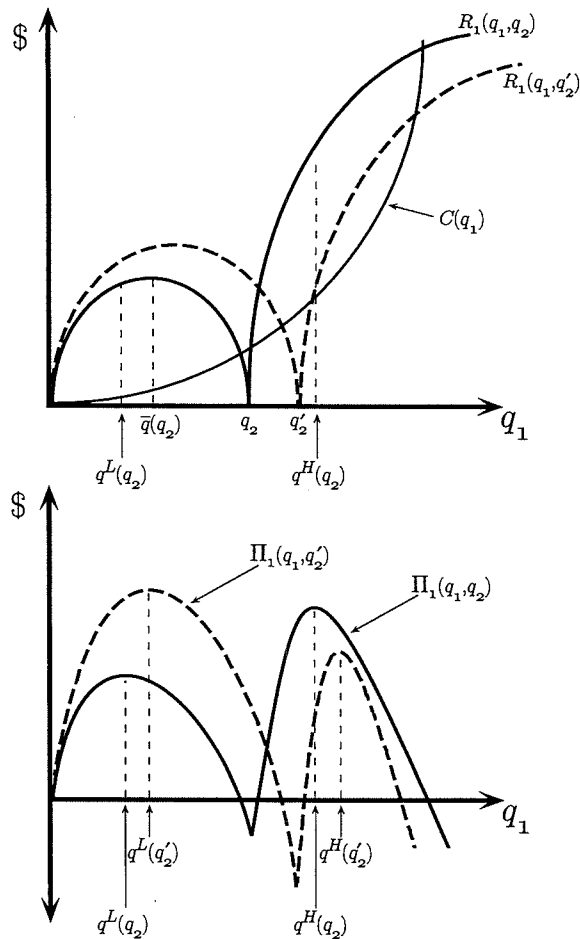


FIGURE 2

Firm 2's revenue, $R_2(q_1, q_2)$, can be defined analogously. From (1) it follows that the revenue functions, $R_1(q_1, q_2)$ and $R_2(q_1, q_2)$, are continuous at any (q_1, q_2) and are differentiable at all points except at $q_1 = q_2$. Note that, if the quality of the two firms are identical ($q_1 = q_2$), both firms' sales revenues will be zero.

Firm 1's revenue function is depicted in Fig. 2 (top). Note that firm 1's revenue depends on firm 2's quality choice. When firm 2's quality is q_2 , firm 1's revenue is depicted by the solid revenue line; the dashed revenue

line depicts firm 1's revenue when firm 2's quality is slightly larger, say q_2' .

The shape of the revenue function warrants several comments. First, suppose that firm 2 chooses q_2 and firm 1 is the high quality firm. In this case, note that firm 1's revenue increases when the distance between the qualities is increased. The greater distance could be due to an increase in its own quality or to a reduction in the rival's quality. On the other hand, if the distance between the qualities narrows (for example, when firm 2 slightly increases its quality to q_2'), firm 1's revenue falls (the revenue function shifts down to the dashed line).

Second, continue to assume that firm 2 chooses quality q_2 but now imagine that firm 1 is the low quality firm. In this case, firm 1 benefits when firm 2 improves its quality. For example, if firm 2 moves from q_2 to q_2' , firm 1's revenue function shifts up. However, firm 1's revenue does not necessarily increase when the distance between qualities increases due to a decrease in its own quality. Rather, firm 1 prefers to maintain an optimal distance from firm 2's quality. In the diagram this "optimal distance" quality is depicted as $\bar{q}(q_2)$. This is because the low quality firm faces two margins: one with respect to the high quality good and one with respect to the outside good (i.e., no sale). If firm 1 raises its quality any higher than $\bar{q}(q_2)$, the products become too similar and competition reduces revenue. On the other hand, firm 1 does not want its quality to be too low, in order to avoid losing customers to the outside good.

Third, the revenue functions are also characterized by some important second-order effects. In particular, the firms' revenue functions are locally concave in their own quality. Formally,

$$\frac{\partial^2 R_i(q_1, q_2)}{\partial q_i^2} < 0, \quad \text{for } q_1 \neq q_2, i = 1, 2. \quad (2)$$

In addition, the farther apart are the firms' qualities, the smaller is the effect of changes in the rival's quality choice. Formally,

$$\frac{\partial^2 R_i(q_1, q_2)}{\partial q_1 \partial q_2} > 0, \quad \forall (q_1, q_2), i = 1, 2. \quad (3)$$

Characterization of Optimal Quality Choice

Now that we have characterized how second-stage sales revenue is determined, we can proceed to examine the first-stage incentives. The profit from the first stage, $\Pi_i(q_1, q_2)$, consists of revenue from the second stage less the cost of R&D investment. We will assume that firm i , $i = 1, 2$, incurs a R&D cost, $C(q_i)$, to develop quality q_i . We scale the quality index so

G until the first-order condition is satisfied (which is on the best-response correspondence since $\tilde{q} > \hat{q}$) and decreases thereafter.

In addition, the direction of increasing firm 1's profit along its best-response correspondence is denoted. Along the upper segment of the best-response correspondence profit increases as we move to the southwest. In other words, if firm 1 sells the higher quality product, profits increase the lower is firm 2's quality. In the limit, $q_2 = 0$, and firm 1 has a monopoly. On the other hand, along the lower segment of the best-response correspondence profit increases as we move to the northeast. In other words, when firm 1 sells the lower quality product, profits increase the greater is its rival's quality. In the limit, firm 2's quality becomes so large that only those consumers with the highest marginal willingness to pay can afford the superior product, leaving the vast majority of consumers to firm 1 (i.e., firm 1 virtually has a monopoly).

3. EQUILIBRIA UNDER U.S. PATENT RULES

We begin by solving for the optimal quality choices assuming the disclosure rules defined by the U.S. patent system are in effect. By graphing both firms' best-response correspondences $\beta_i(q_j)$, $i = 1, 2$, we can solve for the Nash equilibria in the game with simultaneous quality choices (Fig. 4). A pure strategy Nash equilibrium will be the intersection of the best-response correspondences. There are two pure strategy equilibria, one involving $q_1 > q_2$ and the other with $q_2 > q_1$. The two equilibria are symmetric.¹⁰ We will refer to the equilibrium involving $q_i > q_j$ as E_i^U . In addition, one can show that, of the two possible Nash equilibria under the U.S. disclosure rules, each firm prefers the equilibrium where it sells the high quality product. In other words, firm i earns greater profit at the equilibrium E_i^U . This is due to the fact that the firm supplying the superior product services the consumers with high marginal willingness to pay, and therefore is able to charge a higher price for its product. We summarize this discussion with the following proposition.

PROPOSITION 1. *Under the U.S. patent system, there are two symmetric equilibria. In each equilibrium, the firm selling the superior product earns greater profit than the firm selling the inferior quality product.*

4. EQUILIBRIUM UNDER JAPANESE PATENT RULES

We now consider the optimal quality choices of the game with sequential quality choice which corresponds to the Japanese patent system. Without

¹⁰ The quality pairs are the same in both equilibria; only the identity of the firm supplying the high quality product changes.

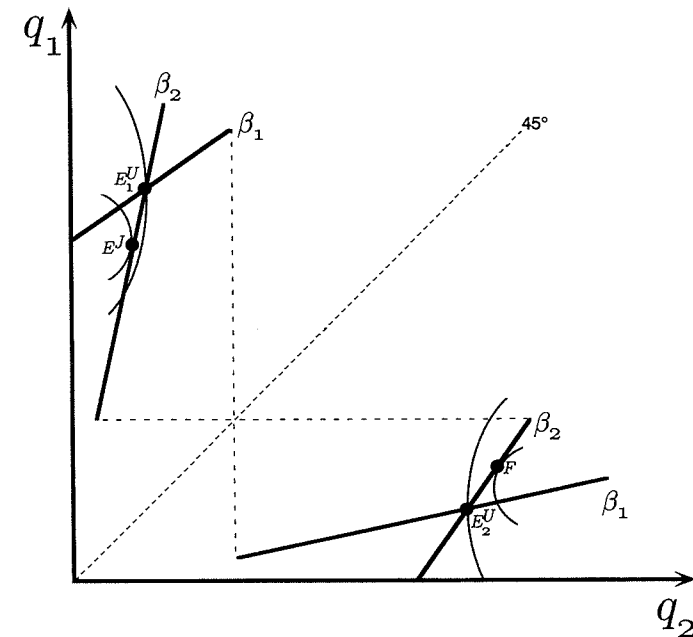


FIGURE 4

loss of generality, assume firm 1 files its patent application first and the application is laid open before firm 2 makes its own quality choice. With this information structure, firm 2's R&D level should maximize its profit given that it observes firm 1's choice. That is, firm 2's choice should satisfy the best-response correspondence, $q_2 = \beta_2(q_1)$. Firm 1 maximizes its profit by choosing the quality corresponding to the highest isoprofit curve along firm 2's best-response curve.

In Fig. 4, for $q_1 > q_2$, firm 1 achieves higher profit by moving southwest from E_1^U along $q_2 = \beta_2(q_1)$ to the point E^J . At E^J firm 1's isoprofit curve is tangent to firm 2's best-response correspondence. For $q_1 < q_2$, firm 1 achieves higher profit by moving northeast from E_2^U along $q_2 = \beta_2(q_1)$ to the point F .¹¹

Note that F and E^J are only local maxima for firm 1; however, as was the case under U.S. rules, firm 1 prefers to sell the high quality product.

¹¹ Of course, either F or E^J could occur at the "kink" of $\beta_2(q_1)$. Our results do not depend on the tangency of the solution.

In other words, E^J is the global maximum. This discussion can be summarized as:

PROPOSITION 2. Let firm 1 be the first firm to file for patent protection. Under the Japanese patent system, there is one equilibrium, E^J .

5. COMPARING EQUILIBRIA UNDER U.S. AND JAPANESE PATENT SYSTEMS

We begin by comparing the set of qualities offered at the Japanese equilibrium, E^J , and firm 1's preferred U.S. equilibrium, E_1^U . Since the two U.S. equilibria are symmetric, the set of qualities available to consumers is the same at E_1^U and E_2^U . From the consumers' viewpoint, all that is relevant is the pair of qualities offered, not the identity of the firms supplying the qualities, which implies that the two U.S. equilibria are equivalent. In light of this equivalence, we will find it convenient to focus on the qualities offered at E_1^U , i.e., when firm 1 supplies the superior product.

Along firm 1's best-response correspondence, E^J lies to the northeast of E_1^U , implying that the Japanese practice of laying open the patent application leads firm 1 to choose a quality level lower than it would if its information was not revealed. Moreover, this lower quality induces the rival to also choose a lower quality.

In other words:

PROPOSITION 3. The qualities offered under Japanese rules are lower pair-wise than the qualities offered under U.S. patent rules.

The intuition for this result is that first filer uses the laying open of its application to influence its rivals quality choice. Because the second firm prefers to avoid directly competing with firm 1's preexisting patent application, it will adjust its quality choice accordingly. Since the best-response correspondences are upward sloping, firm 1 takes advantage of the disclosure requirement to supply a lower quality than it would if its information were not revealed.

Because we emphasize the coordination aspect of the disclosure requirement, rather than spillover issues, our model also implies that firm 1 benefits from this information revelation.

PROPOSITION 4. The firm supplying the superior product earns greater profit under Japanese rules while the firm supplying the inferior product earns greater profit under U.S. rules.

It can be argued, however, that policymakers are more concerned with industry profit than how individual firms fare. This may be particularly true in Japan where it is widely held that institutions and practices

are aimed toward facilitating joint-profit maximizing behavior, e.g., the distribution system, the prevalence of retail price maintenance arrangements, exclusive dealerships, and antitrust laws. We find that Japanese disclosure rules are consistent with Japanese institutions/laws that are believed to facilitate joint-profit maximizing behavior. Specifically, we can numerically show that:

PROPOSITION 5. Aggregate profit is greater under Japanese patent rules than under U.S. patent rules.

The different disclosure rules may also affect consumers' well-being. Since the two qualities are lower under the Japanese system, it seems intuitive that consumer surplus will be lower under Japanese disclosure rules. On the other hand, despite the fact that both qualities are lower, if the competition between the two products is sufficient (i.e., the qualities are sufficiently close together) consumers may be better off due to the lower prices. It can be verified that the qualities offered by the firms are sufficiently different, implying that consumers' desire for superior products is the primary effect, and therefore that:

PROPOSITION 6. Consumers' surplus is greater under U.S. patent rules than under Japanese patent rules.

Taking Propositions 5 and 6 together, it becomes clear that the Japanese disclosure rules have the effect of benefiting producers at the expense of consumers. Again, this finding is consistent with other aspects of the Japanese economy that appear to be geared toward maximizing producer surplus.

Finally, we can calculate the overall effect of the disclosure rules. Defining social surplus as the sum of profits and consumer surplus, we can numerically show that:

PROPOSITION 7. Social surplus is greater under U.S. patent rules than under Japanese patent rules.

In other words, the benefit to producers from the Japanese practice of laying open patent applications is outweighed by the loss to consumers. In fact, the loss to consumers is an order of magnitude larger than the benefit to producers.

6. EXTENSIONS AND ROBUSTNESS

Above we have shown that the laying open of patent applications lowers quality choices, raises industry profit, and lowers consumer surplus. Below we examine the robustness of these conclusions to alternative assumptions

on preferences and technology. We also examine consequences of extensions to the basic model.

Strategic Complementarity of the Revenue Function

An important property is the strategic complementarity of the revenue function.¹² This property gives rise to the upward-sloping best-response correspondence. With the upward-sloping best-response correspondences, under Japanese rules the first filer will always choose a lower quality than it would under U.S. rules.

While strategic complementarity is a general condition that arises in many R&D models, in our model it arises from the assumptions that firms choose prices in the second stage and that the products are substitutes. Consider relaxing each of these assumptions. First, the same demand system can allow quantities to be chosen at the second stage. As shown in Aoki (1994), quantity competition results in one segment of the best-response correspondence being downward sloping and the other upward sloping. In this case, the first filer chooses a quality higher than under U.S. rules, but the second filer still chooses a lower quality.

Second, it is possible to have demand systems where products are complements. In that case, disclosure rules could facilitate both firms to engage in either more or less R&D, depending upon the nature of the complementarity and on whether there is price or quantity competition.

R&D Technology

Another key property is the fact that the cost of R&D does not increase too quickly. This implies that, of the two local optima under Japanese rules, the equilibrium is that where the first filer produces the higher quality product. Thus, we conclude that, in comparison with U.S. rules, an inferior pair of qualities is offered under Japanese rules. Note that the other local optimum involves the first filer choosing the lower quality; this could be the equilibrium if cost increased very rapidly. If this were the Japanese optimum (point *F* in Fig. 4) then Japanese patent rules would result in a pair of qualities superior to that of U.S. rules. Therefore, the fact that cost does not increase too quickly is crucial.

We stress, however, that the situation that we have modeled (i.e., where cost does not increase too quickly) is in fact the interesting case. If the cost of quality increases very quickly—and therefore quality is very expensive—the effect of different patent systems would be minimal since firms would choose to make very small R&D investments under either system. Therefore, the insights of this paper are most appropriate for situations when the cost of quality is small or rises relatively slowly.

¹² Technically, this is equivalent to the cross derivative being positive.

R&D Choice vs Filing Choice

We have assumed throughout this paper that firms truthfully represent their R&D quality in their patent application. However, firms may have incentives to strategically over- or underrepresent their true quality. The fact that the applications are carefully examined by the patent office makes it plausible to assume that overrepresentation of quality is not possible.

On the other hand, a firm may have an incentive to underrepresent its quality in order to induce the rival to choose even lower quality. By actually producing a product with the true quality, a firm is able to attain higher profit than it would have had the rival reacted to the true higher quality. However, the patent protection will only be for claimed lower (underrepresented) quality. It is questionable that, even after accounting for the scope of protection, the true (better) quality is protected. If it is not protected, then as long as imitation is not too costly, profits will be driven to zero if products are sold with the true quality but patented at a lower claimed quality. Thus, we conclude that the incentives for a firm to underrepresent its true quality is limited.

Determination of First Filer

The determination of the leader and follower have been left exogenous in our formulation. Our model may be extended by adding an additional stage at the beginning of the game to address this question. One may consider a situation such as the patent race analyzed by Reinganum (1982). She has shown, in a dynamic game framework, that the research intensity of firms in this additional stage will be increasing in the winner's profit and decreasing in the loser's profit. In our context, the winner is the first filer and the loser is the follower.

This result and our Proposition 4 imply that the research intensity will be greater under the Japanese patent system than under the U.S. system. Thus, there is the possibility that any gain in profits under the Japanese system is actually competed away in the race to be the first filer. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine analytically how the expected equilibrium payoff of the patent race game depends on winner and loser profits. A numerical analysis shows that in fact this rent dissipation does not occur. That is, expected equilibrium payoff of the patent race is larger with profits under the Japanese system than with profits under the U.S. system. Thus, even taking into account the expenditures incurred during the race to be the first filer, firms find the Japanese system more attractive. In addition, greater research intensity means that the expected date of success is earlier under the Japanese system.

By simply applying Reinganum's results to our model, we are assuming there is no relationship between the research expenditure in the patent

race stage and the ability to develop a higher quality product. It is possible that some relationship exists. For instance, superior research might imply lower cost of development. Analysis of a model which takes this into account is certainly an interesting one and we have left it for future research.

7. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We have shown that the disclosure requirements of the Japanese patent system result in lower quality offerings than under the U.S. patent rules. We have argued that the Japanese practice of laying open patent application is another example of the information disseminating emphasis of the Japanese patent system. We have focused on an aspect of patent policy other than the traditional breadth and length.

We have also focused on the coordination aspect of information dissemination. Previous research has emphasized other aspects of the Japanese patent system's propensity for information revelation. For instance, Ordover (1991) emphasizes aspects of the Japanese system that induce information sharing via licensing, cross-licensing, and joint R&D ventures. Scotchmer and Green (1990) compare the Japanese "first-to-file" priority rule with the U.S.'s "first-to-invent" and find that Japanese priority rules lead to more disclosure. However, this earlier research focuses on the *amount* of information disclosed under the alternative systems while we focus on the *timing* of disclosure.

Although it has not been formally analyzed in this paper, the Japanese patent system may have important implications for concerns over spillover. As discussed earlier, spillover would also result in the first filer reducing its quality. However, spillover would not cause the profit of the first filer to increase. In addition, very specific assumptions on the R&D efficiency of the two firms would be required in order for the aggregate profit to increase with spillover. Our discussion suggests that information revelation has two effects: spillover and coordination. Which effect dominates is difficult to assess, but the fact that U.S. firms strongly backed the recent GATT accord which incorporates the laying open of patent applications is consistent with the belief that firms prefer information dissemination. In addition, this valuable coordination device cannot be duplicated by U.S. firms acting alone. The information disclosure must be truthful and credible. There is no such guarantee if the revelation is simply voluntary, since firms may have an incentive to misrepresent their true quality. However, information revealed through the laying open is credible since the government announces the actual patent application.

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