

Ciao, Command Line! : A Quick Look at STN Version Two

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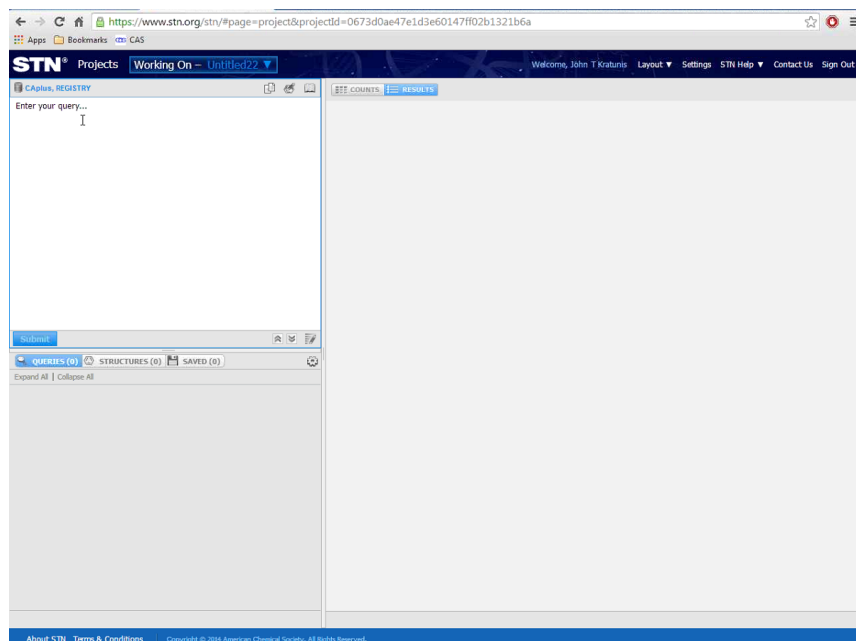
30 years after the launch of STN, the Chemical Abstracts Service (CAS) has embarked upon a multi-year development project to create and implement STN Version 2. Utilized by science and law librarians, pharmaceutical scientists, and patent attorneys alike, STN provides access to over 125 scientific and patent databases (including both Derwent and INPADOC), covering a broad range of journal literature, chemical structure, and patent content.

The classic STN interface functions via command line searching, providing the user with a high level of search control and precision (accompanied by the inevitably steep and potentially intimidating command line learning curve). STN's command line search approach, and the search engine supporting it, has remained relatively unchanged over the platform's life-span...until now. I recently had the opportunity to explore the new interface (<http://www.stn.org/stn/>) with STN trainer John Kratunis.

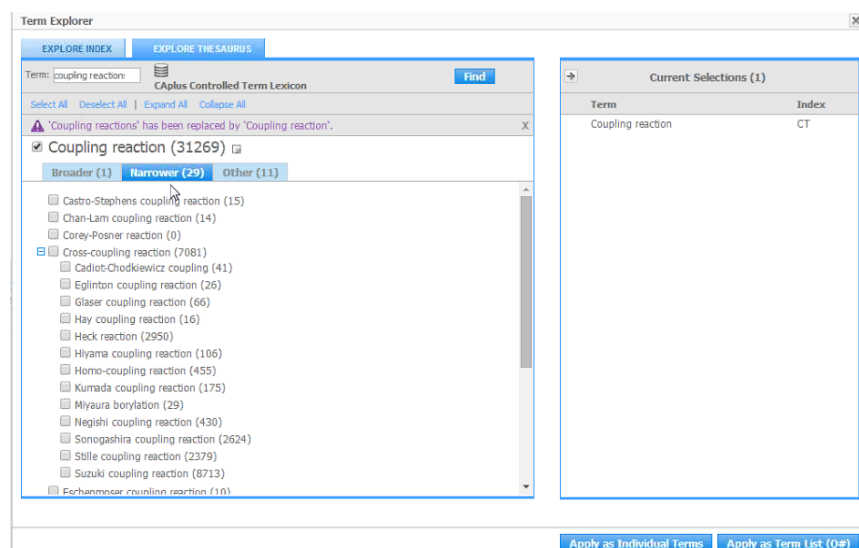
How is the new interface different?

The new STN platform, or STN Version Two, implements a completely new search engine and search approach, employing Oracle-based tools to produce a unique proprietary interface designed specifically with the STN end-user (and his or her unique workflow) in mind. Logging into the platform brings the user to a single screen, which includes three moveable and re-sizeable panels:

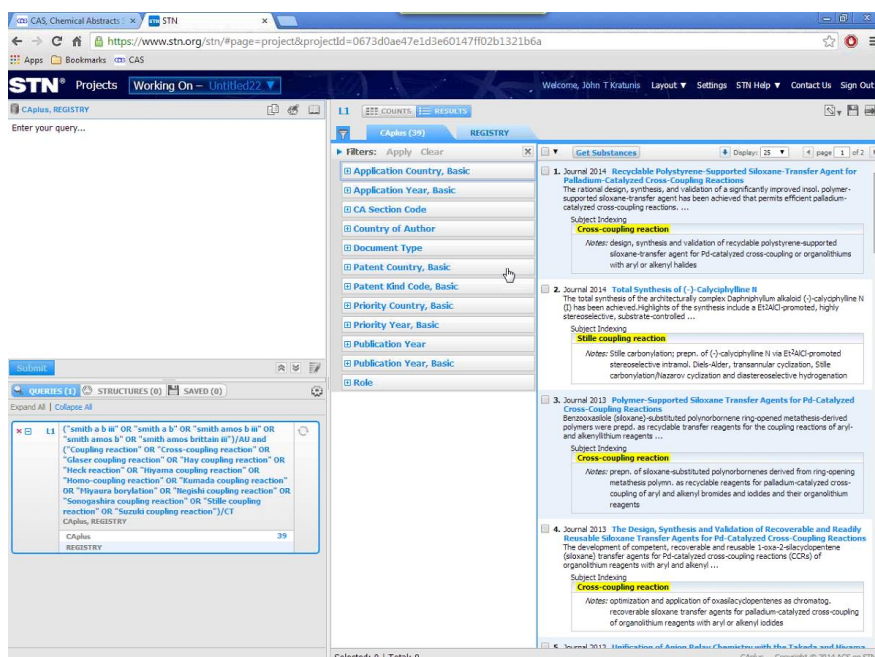
1. Where the query is built;
2. Where answers to the query display; and
3. Where previous queries (the search history) are listed.



While command line searching is still available within new STN (no doubt delighting the experienced user), intuitive query building tools are a major feature and benefit of the new interface. From within the query panel, one is walked through several query-building windows which direct the user in selecting the database(s) for search, and in selecting and filling database-specific search fields. User-input terms are standardized for improved results retrieval, and the CAS-built thesaurus and index suggest related and narrower/broader terms, as well as proper name variants, to allow the user to drill down to a more precise result.



Queries thus built may then be tested, enabling the user to determine if the query is overly broad or narrow before then examining the search results set. The final search results list displays in the right-hand pane, and can be filtered and exported (export is currently available in Word format, but more formats are coming). Each result in the list includes a link out of STN to the site where that item might be purchased or acquired free-of-charge (depending on the source).



What are the major advantages?

Kratunis emphasized to me that the greatest strengths of the new STN are invisible in the visual aspect of the interface, but evident in every aspect of the user experience and workflow. Chief amongst these improvements is the new platform's search engine power. The old platform places limits upon the number of terms and variables in each query, which means that conducting complex searches requires the construction and subsequent combination of multiple queries. Users frequently complain that they bump up against query limits; these concerns have been fully addressed by the new interface, which can run queries of literally unlimited complexity. Kratunis told me that no one has yet been able to "break" the new STN search.

The interface rebuild underway today also allows for a more dynamic and nimble product in the future; changes suggested by customers were previously difficult to incorporate in STN because of strict and somewhat antiquated platform limitations. The new interface allows developers to work constantly to improve user experience and to liaise directly with customers with specific recommendations in mind. The online help section of the new STN has been completely rebuilt (including better and searchable content and demonstration videos), and will include an instant feedback mechanism whereby users can make recommendations and voice complaints.

New STN also incorporates features specifically of interest to the IP law librarian. Individual results within a patent database results list include an "extended patent family" button, which produces a table of broadly related patents; each entry in the table includes the name of the database(s) that identify that patent as being related to the parent.

Source: CAplus, DWPI, INPADOCbib, Full-Text Patent Databases Copyright © 2014 American Chemical Society, FIZ Karlsruhe GmbH - All Rights Reserved.							
Table 1							
Priority Summary							
Publication Count: 9							
Publication			Application			Language	Database
Number	Kind	Date	Number	Kind	Date		
AU2011314358	A1	20130404	AU2011-314358	A	20110831	EN	AUPATFULL CAplus DWPI INPADOCbib
CA2809966	A1	20120419	CA2011-2809966	A	20110831	EN	CAplus DWPI INPADOCbib
EP2611440	A1	20130710	EP2011-832859	A	20110831	EN	CAplus DWPI EPFULL INPADOCbib
EP2611440	A4	20140219	EP2011-832859	A	20110831		INPADOCbib
HK1186661	A0	20140321	HK2013-114135		20131220	EN	DWPI
JP2013536837	A	20130926	JP2013-527062	A	20110831		INPADOCbib JPFULL
JP2013536837	T	20130926	JP2013-527062		20110831	JA	CAplus
JP2013536837	W	20130926	JP2013-527062		20110831	JA	DWPI
KR2013132774	A	20131205	KR2013-7008187	A	20110831		INPADOCbib KRFULL
KR2013132774	A	20131205	KR2013-708187		20110831	KO	CAplus DWPI
US20130165511	A1	20130627	US2011-13820338	A	20110831	EN	INPADOCbib USFULL
US20130165511	A1	20130627	US2013-13820338		20130301	EN	CAplus DWPI
WO2012050594*	A1	20120419	WO2011-US1529	W	20110831	EN	CAplus* DWPI* EPFULL INPADOCbib PCTFULL

* Indicates basic patent

This table exports neatly in an Excel file for delivery to your end user.

From a broader law library resource perspective, the tale of database owners moving away from command line interfaces is one familiar to all of us. What appears to set CAS apart is that they have developed and are continuing to develop a completely unique and proprietary product that in every way suits both the type of information contained in STN's databases and the methods its users employ to retrieve that information, and which prioritizes user workflow in every aspect of the redesign process. In no way is CAS shoehorning STN into a generic interface that suits neither the information contained within, nor the needs of its users.

Where is CAS in the development process?

The new STN platform currently allows searching within 16 of the over 125 databases available through old STN. These migrated files are primarily STN's patent files. The process of migration going forward will be gradual, though steady. As Kratunis explained, each database has its own search options and fields, and the search tools and functionality for each must be fine-tuned before it can be migrated to the new platform. The process of fully migrating all databases is expected to take roughly two years. High priority databases for forthcoming migration include the biology and biochemistry databases, to be brought over in the 4th quarter of 2014, and the MARPAT database of generic chemical structures, to be brought over in the 1st or 2nd quarter of 2015.

Can I still use "old" STN? What about pricing?

Both old and new STN platforms will run concurrently throughout the migration process and beyond; CAS is committed to substantial overlap time and will facilitate the user adjustment process.

Currently, new STN is only available to fixed fee plan customers. This is highly impactful for firms, as many private law libraries use STN on a transactional, or "by the click" plan, where searches, results, and even time spent within a database all incur unique charges. A fixed fee plan involves budget-friendly, routine charges...on a scale which may or may not be manageable for your firm in this cost-cutting era. I voiced this concern to Kratunis; I also mentioned that, while new STN queries and results are filed into folders that can be labeled with client-matter numbers, there is no mechanism to require the entry of a client-matter number upon login, and thus no structure to recoup costs from clients on whose behalf research is conducted. Kratunis was receptive to my concerns, emphasized CAS' ongoing research into the development of more flexible pricing plans, and voiced an interest in speaking to more law library managers and directors (and specifically to those in private firms) about both their research needs and their budgetary and charge-back requirements; facilitating different user types' affordable access to the new STN seems both a high priority and an evolving project for CAS.

Who should I call if I want to know more?

The CAS Customer Center (which also provides support to current subscribers and users), is open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. EST, Monday through Friday. They can be reached at 1-800-753-4227 (press option 2 to speak to an account representative about a demo for your library) or via email at help@cas.org.