

STARHOME GMBH, v. AT&T MOBILITY, LLC, Appeal No. 2012-1694 (Fed. Cir. February 24, 2014). Before Moore, Schall, and Reyna. Appealed from D. Del. (Judge Sleet).

Background:

Starhome sued Defendants for infringement of its patent that recites an "intelligent gateway." At trial, the District Court construed the term "intelligent gateway" to mean a network element that transfers information between a mobile network and a network external to the mobile network based on the well-known technical meaning of "gateway."

In reliance on this claim construction, Defendants moved for summary judgment of non-infringement because Defendants' devices do not connect to an external network. The District Court entered a judgment of non-infringement based on the District Court's claim construction. Starhome appealed.

Issue/Holding:

Did the District Court err in its construction of claim terms? No, affirmed.

Discussion:

Claim terms are typically given their ordinary and customary meaning as understood by an artisan of ordinary skill. The two exceptions to this general rule include: 1) when the patentee acts as his or her own lexicographer and provides his or her own definition, or 2) when the patentee gives up the full scope of the term in the specification or during prosecution. Further, there is a heavy presumption that claim terms carry their ordinary and customary meaning, and courts typically require a showing of clear intent to depart from the ordinary and customary meaning.

The Federal Circuit agreed with the District Court that, based on the well understood meaning of "gateway," the term "intelligent gateway" would be understood by an artisan of ordinary skill to require a connection between different networks. In disputing this claim construction, Starhome argued that this claim construction would exclude an embodiment shown in a figure of the specification, which shows the operation of a single network. However, in response, the Federal Circuit explained that the figure in question was a simplified depiction of the larger system that requires an external network. Thus, although the Federal Circuit acknowledged that this figure introduced ambiguity into the meaning of "intelligent gateway," the ambiguity did not meet the requisite clear intent required to depart from the term's ordinary meaning.

Next, Starhome argued that various unasserted claims required the "intelligent gateway" to connect to a specific external network and thus, under the doctrine of claim differentiation, "intelligent gateway" does not require a connection to an external network because such interpretation would render these claims redundant and import limitations between claims. In response, the Federal Circuit explained that the claims in question merely claim a specific type of external network. Therefore, the Federal Circuit opined that the District Court's interpretation neither imports claim limitations nor renders the claims redundant.

Hence, the Federal Circuit held that the District Court did not err in its construction of "intelligent gateway."