

June 3, 2014

In *Limelight Networks, Inc. v. Akamai Techs., Inc.* (U.S., No. 13-369), the Supreme Court held that a defendant cannot be liable for induced patent infringement under 35 U.S.C. § 271(b) in the absence of an underlying direct infringer. The decision reverses the *en banc* Federal Circuit opinion from August 31, 2012 in *Akamai Techs., Inc. v. Limelight Networks, Inc.*, 692 F.3d 1301 (Fed. Cir. 2012), which had changed the law by creating liability for induced infringement where the accused defendant performed some steps of a method patent and encouraged others to perform the remaining steps—even if there was no single entity liable for direct infringement. This short-lived avenue for alleging induced infringement is now foreclosed.

The *Limelight* case highlights a strict standard for establishing infringement of method claims when the steps of those claims are performed by different actors. Under the Federal Circuit's opinion in *Muniauction, Inc. v. Thomson Corp.*, 532, F.3d 1318 (Fed. Cir. 2008), a defendant can be liable for direct infringement under 35 U.S.C. § 271(a) only if it alone performs every step of a claimed method or if the steps are undertaken by multiple parties but the defendant "exercises 'control or direction' over the entire process such that every step is attributable to the controlling party." *Id.* at 1329. By "[a]ssuming without deciding that the Federal Circuit's holding in *Muniauction* is correct," the Supreme Court concluded that there was no proof that Limelight directly infringed the disputed method claim since "the performance of all the patent's steps is not attributable to any one person." Without a direct infringer, the Court summarily dismissed the allegations of induced infringement: "where there has been no direct infringement, there can be no inducement of infringement under § 271(b)."

Practical considerations

The Supreme Court's direct infringer requirement returns induced infringement to the standard that existed prior to the Federal Circuit's *en banc* decision. In doing so, the Supreme Court also reopens the purported infringement "loophole" for method claims that the Federal Circuit sought to close. This "loophole" allows a party to structure its products, services, and third-party relationships so that different steps of a method are performed by different entities and, as long as performance of all of the claimed steps cannot be attributed to a single entity that controls or directs the other parties, the concerted performance of the claimed method avoids any liability for direct infringement and automatically negates the existence of induced infringement. Typically, this strategy relies on the performance of at least one step of a method claim by end users or customers, but it could also enlist other entities that have no contractual or agency relationship with the party.

As a practical matter, patentees can combat the requirements of *Limelight* through artful claim drafting from the perspective of a single anticipated actor and placing greater emphasis on system claims. In areas where conduct is highly regulated and predictable, such as pharmaceuticals regulated by the FDA, anticipating the coordinated conduct of multiple entities and formulating claim strategies directed to a single actor will be more predictable. Conversely, in less regulated technologies, such as information technologies, predicting how an entity might try to divide responsibility for performing certain method steps is less predictable. Entities with such operational flexibility will enjoy a greater ability to exploit the infringement "loophole," and patentees may be forced to focus their infringement allegations on the limited damages associated with the internal testing and development activities of an accused infringer.

Yet, while the *Limelight* decision strikes a blow to the scope of induced infringement, it may not be the final word on infringement liability for joint conduct. The briefing and arguments presented by the parties before the Federal Circuit primarily focused on the scope of direct infringement under § 271(a), not induced infringement under § 271(b). Although the Federal Circuit deferred resolution on the scope of direct infringement in lieu of its disposition regarding induced infringement, the Supreme Court's reversal will likely reopen the direct infringement front for further judicial consideration. Indeed, the *Limelight* decision itself, in addition to comments by the Supreme Court Justices during oral argument, foreshadows the possibility of a more expansive view of the sort of joint conduct that constitutes direct infringement under § 271(a).

This content is provided for general informational purposes only, and your access or use of the content does not create an attorney-client relationship between you or your organization and Cooley LLP, Cooley (UK) LLP, or any other affiliated practice or entity (collectively referred to as "Cooley"). By accessing this content, you agree that the information provided does not constitute legal or other professional advice. This content is not a

substitute for obtaining legal advice from a qualified attorney licensed in your jurisdiction, and you should not act or refrain from acting based on this content. This content may be changed without notice. It is not guaranteed to be complete, correct or up to date, and it may not reflect the most current legal developments. Prior results do not guarantee a similar outcome. Do not send any confidential information to Cooley, as we do not have any duty to keep any information you provide to us confidential. When advising companies, our attorney-client relationship is with the company, not with any individual. This content may have been generated with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI) in accordance with our AI Principles, may be considered Attorney Advertising and is subject to our [legal notices](#).

Key Contacts

Orion Armon Colorado	oarmon@cooley.com +1 720 566 4119
Dr. Adam Pivovar Washington, DC	apivovar@cooley.com +1 202 842 7889

This information is a general description of the law; it is not intended to provide specific legal advice nor is it intended to create an attorney-client relationship with Cooley LLP. Before taking any action on this information you should seek professional counsel.

Copyright © 2023 Cooley LLP, 3175 Hanover Street, Palo Alto, CA 94304; Cooley (UK) LLP, 22 Bishopsgate, London, UK EC2N 4BQ. Permission is granted to make and redistribute, without charge, copies of this entire document provided that such copies are complete and unaltered and identify Cooley LLP as the author. All other rights reserved.