

TEXAS LAWYER

An **ALM** Publication

texaslawyer.com | March 31, 2021

Here's How a Houston Firm Returned to the Office Nearly a Year Ago

BY BRENDA SAPINO JEFFREYS

Leaders at many firms across the state and nation are working on plans for ending remote work, figuring out how and when to open the doors for lawyers and staff who have been toiling at home offices for the last year under COVID-19 stay-home orders and recommendations.

That's not an issue for Houston business and litigation firm **BoyarMiller**, which reopened its office last May 11 to lawyers and staff, and to clients this March.

Firm chairman Chris Hanslik said the early reopening worked well for the 32-lawyer firm because everyone followed the strict COVID-19 protocols. It was the best way, in his view, to maintain firm culture and productivity.



Chris Hanslik.

"I'm proud of how our people responded, and it was absolutely the right thing for us," Hanslik said.

Hanslik said the firm went remote March 23, 2020, when



Associates interacting in the lobby of BoyarMiller in Houston after the firm reopened its office during the COVID pandemic in 2021. Courtesy photo

Harris County issued a "stay home, work safe order," asking everyone to stay home except for workers in essential sectors. He said that even though firms were "in the definition of essential," the firm moved into remote work mode.

Even then, he said, a "handful" of people—mostly lawyers but also staff in the mailroom and in accounting—continued to come to the office through the rest of March and in April last year.

During that time, the firm used Zoom to keep everyone

connected, and the shareholders had frequent Zoom meetings.

Like many firms, BoyarMiller also scheduled Zoom social events, such as happy hours on Wednesdays. People were chatting at the time about books they were reading, and Netflix shows they were watching, such as "Tiger King" and "Ozark," he recalled.

Hanslik said he also recorded Zoom interviews each day in April with a different employee of the firm, and sent a link to everyone, in another attempt to

keep everyone connected and to maintain the firm's culture.

But by late April, Hanslik was hearing from many people that they missed the office, and productivity was not always at the level it had been in the office. The Harris County order was set to expire April 30, so Hanslik said he consulted with a Houston health wellness firm, FormulaMed, to come up with guidelines for the employees to reenter the office.

With that, the firm opened its doors May 11, using protocols that mandated masks in all public spaces at the office, hand sanitizer at desks, stepped-up cleaning, plexiglass to separate open workspaces, and no guests in the office. Within a week, 60% to 70% of employees were working in the office, and by June 8, the firm resumed normal business hours for everyone except those with high-risk medical conditions or child care responsibilities, he said.

Over the summer, one or two employees of the firm came down with COVID-19, but those cases were not traced back to the office, he said.

"It's good evidence that we followed the recommended rules of wearing a mask," he said. "You can function, even though there's COVID out there."

Maintaining the firm's culture was a big reason why BoyarMiller bucked the trend and returned to the office

months—and probably more than a year—earlier than many other firms. Hanslik said there's great value in collaboration, without having to schedule a Zoom call.

The firm had planned to allow clients into the office last October, but COVID-19 cases were surging, so firm leaders backed off those plans. On March 1, the firm reopened to clients—with masks required and with no more than six people in a conference room—and the firm even hosted a mediation this month, he said.

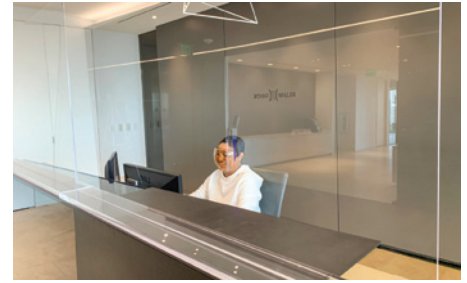
Right now, everyone is working regularly in the office, he said, except for one employee with young children and another with a health issue.

Hanslik has no regrets for the decision to reopen earlier than most firms because of everyone's commitment to follow protocols, and what turned out to be a very limited number of people getting the coronavirus. He said people felt comfortable getting on board because the guidelines came from the medical consulting company.

Looking forward, Hanslik said the firm is unlikely to make vaccinations mandatory, but he said he is not aware of anyone at the firm who has said they do not plan to get it.

In the meantime, protocols will continue and plexiglass will stay up for the foreseeable future.

"Until the vaccine has been administered at a level where



Reception area of BoyarMiller in Houston after the firm reopened its office during the COVID pandemic in 2021. Courtesy photo



BoyarMiller offices in Houston reopen during the COVID pandemic in 2021. Courtesy photo

we are comfortable where cases come down, it's not so obtrusive," he said.

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