



THE BIG INTERVIEW

# Houston growth story continues

Houston OEP Jay Cuclis gives an insight into the office's rapid growth.



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## Houston growth story continues

**O**ver the past 18 months, our Houston office has experienced rapid and dramatic growth, both in talent and revenues, as it continues to build a broad client base.

The office was opened just over four years ago in February 2018 with three partners. Since then, it's grown to approximately 80 lawyers.

Office Executive Partner Jay Cuclis says: "I was confident in what we could achieve when we opened, but the speed of growth has exceeded my expectations.

"In 2021, our team of lawyers almost doubled in size, with the value of reported time exceeding \$100 million. This was driven by significant activity across the office, with substantial client work in the areas of traditional energy transactions, energy transition and SPACs.

"Client demand has continued to be strong in 2022."

The office's success endorses the Firm's decision to open in Houston.

Jay says: "The Firm already had an extremely well-regarded global energy practice, but completing the final piece of the puzzle was establishing an office in Houston.

"Thanks in part to our existing reputation in the energy sector, our arrival was greeted very positively by clients.

"Our client base here has been roughly an equal mix of clients brought over by lateral hires and White & Case's existing clients, with the addition of several new clients to the Firm.

"We also now feel that the Houston office has become fully integrated with the rest of the Firm and we regularly have visitors from other offices, while Houston lawyers often travel to offices across the network."

Having initially focused on project development, finance and mergers and acquisitions, mainly in the energy industry, Houston is continuing to develop full-service capabilities, having now established capabilities in tax, engineering, procurement and construction (EPC), environmental social and governance (ESG), capital markets, financial restructuring and insolvency (FRI), disputes and trade.

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JAY CUCLIS,  
OFFICE EXECUTIVE  
PARTNER, HOUSTON



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Jay says: “We always planned to grow strategically where we needed expertise, based on client needs and the business case, rather than growing for growth’s sake.

“Everyone we’ve recruited has improved our office in important areas. Add that to a global platform that is unique to the Houston market and we have a compelling offering for clients.”

**“The current increase in energy prices as a result of global events has injected large amounts of capital into the Houston economy.”**

Integrating so many new hires alongside an influx of internal transfers from other White & Case offices could have been difficult, but it’s been achieved in a relatively seamless manner thanks to a careful approach to recruitment.

Jay says: “As well as targeting the best talent, we also looked at the personalities and values of the people we hired to make sure they were a good fit with the Firm. That’s helped us grow rapidly and integrate people smoothly without any impact on our culture.”

The influx of talent has been driven by client demand.

“The current increase in energy prices as a result of global events has injected large amounts of capital into the Houston economy,” says Jay. “As a result, we’re seeing substantial activity in the energy sector, from traditional

oil and gas to increasing energy transition work.

“And, while environmental concerns have naturally put pressure on companies active in the oil and gas sector, those are the very companies who have the capital and motivation to invest in energy transition and that’s exactly what they’re doing alongside their existing operations.

“It’s generating a substantial amount of work for us.”

The opportunities in the Houston market show no sign of abating, but there are challenges.





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Jay says: “One of our biggest challenges is, to some extent, a consequence of our success. We’re now more prominent in the local legal market and rival firms are taking note.

“That means we’re facing increasing pressure from competitors trying to hire our people and compete with us for the largest, most high-profile matters.”

Recent times have seen the Firm secure several such engagements, including being appointed as global project counsel for Key Client Occidental Petroleum in connection with its new carbon-capture projects in the United States and overseas.

Jay says: “It’s a great sign of the stability and diversity of our client base that, while we work with many high-profile clients including Oxy, Schneider Electric, EIG, Exxon Mobil, Calpine, Ara Partners, Chevron, Kimbell Royalty Partners, Invenergy, Old Ironsides and JP Morgan Chase, no one client contributed more than 3 percent of our revenues in 2021.”

Looking ahead, the priority is to continue the upward trajectory of the office. Jay says: “Our strategy is one of continued intelligent growth.

“Our current office space has the capacity for roughly 120 lawyers, so there is scope for us to keep growing, and we’ll continue to strengthen where necessary and when opportunities arise.

“Our philosophy is to play to the Firm’s strengths and take advantage of our unrivalled global platform and the decades of experience we have in the energy sector, as well as our growing capabilities with regard to energy transition.

“We’ll also continue to focus fully on providing a client experience that sets us apart. Ultimately, that comes down to personal relationships and making sure clients feel valued and prioritized.

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