

Interview with Tammo Boinowitz

“That was truly visionary”

Since January, Tammo Boinowitz has steered the fate of BYK-Chemie in Wesel as the company’s managing director.

The new BYK boss talks about the pandemic, climate change, and what he expects from the new government.

WESEL The world of BYK chemistry in 75 minutes – that’s an ambitious plan. The visitor, who had advanced chemistry in high school but has gaps in his memory, has a look at laboratories and production facilities, and learns what additives are. Afterwards, Tammo Boinowitz welcomes to his office in a relaxed atmosphere. The 55 -year-old has been with BYK since January. This is his first interview.



Mr. Boinowitz, you had a problem that many had: You came to BYK-Chemie at a time when, due to the coronavirus pandemic, it was very difficult to settle in, to get to know your new colleagues. What was that like for you?

BOINOWITZ I had prepared myself for the situation. It was easier than I had expected. The digital tools are very helpful, and the fact that ALTANA had already been working very intensively with them for a year at that point. Our central working tool is Teams, a very democratic tool. At the touch of a button, you’re in Wallingford, on the east coast of the U.S., where we have a site, and with another touch, you’re in Shanghai.

So, the situation also had some advantages?

BOINOWITZ When you have a global business, as we do, there are certain benefits. You can have a good, quick exchange across hierarchies very quickly. So, I even got to know people faster than I normally would have. Many things work well. What falls by the wayside, however, is the *feeling* – that applies to employees and customers alike. It's much more difficult to read between the lines of messages.

And now you're slowly starting to meet in person again, even internationally?

BOINOWITZ Yes. I've even been to the United States. I had a National Interest Exception...

...a special permit to enter the country...

BOINOWITZ ...which enabled me to go to the United States in August. That was very important to me, since we have a number of sites there. The global management team members from the U.S. are here right now, by the way. But there have also been a lot of changes at the Wesel site in recent months. We constantly had staff on site in the laboratories and in production – who observed certain rules, of course, to reduce the risk of infection. And I was always here in the office. Direct personal contact provides overall added value. If you want to drive innovations forward, you have to bring people together, exchange ideas, spontaneously create contacts. That's why we want to significantly increase the proportion of on-site work again, as soon as the coronavirus situation safely allows.

What have you learned?

BOINOWITZ That mobile work has certain advantages. For this reason, we don't want to go back to the old world, but want to combine both worlds. And we are well on the way to doing so. Even before the pandemic, we had a company agreement that allowed a maximum of 50 percent of the employees to work on a mobile basis, if the supervisors agreed to this. I found that progressive. We are currently in the process of defining the "new normal."

How has the pandemic changed business?

BOINOWITZ In the second quarter of 2020, in particular, we recorded significant declines in sales. But then there was an upturn in October 2020, which extended into the first half of 2021. Not everyone expected that increase. We are broadly positioned and have products for many end industries. There are applications that have benefited. For example, in the do-it-yourself sector. Everyone has made home improvements. It was a relatively short, significant break, but we are experiencing a strong, sustainable upswing, which, however, is currently being clouded by certain bottlenecks. Restricted freight, restricted raw materials, which ultimately limit growth.

What exactly is limiting you?

BOINOWITZ Freight. Even land freight is sometimes very scarce; truck drivers are lacking. We send most things overseas by ship and in Europe by truck. But we also have airfreight for smaller quantities. Here, our goods are often flown on passenger planes and the flight schedule has been severely thinned out. Raw materials are another issue. In the chemical industry, we generally have a relatively high production volume, which leads to various bottlenecks and cost increases.

So now that they're saying people should buy their Christmas presents soon, that washing machines are out of stock, this also concerns you?

BOINOWITZ The chemical industry is always at the beginning of the supply chain. We saw the problems in the first two quarters and these effects are now reaching the consumer. But we reacted quickly and hired staff, for example in Wesel. Of course, we're also dependent on external factors. But we do everything possible to guarantee that our products are delivered reliably to our customers. We supply many specialties that are only available from us, and customers have been relying on us for decades.

The solvents are supposed to be gradually phased out because they are not particularly environmentally friendly. Your company is working on this. How far along are you?

BOINOWITZ The trend toward replacing solvent-based systems with water-based systems is a major innovation driver for us. We've been working on this for many years now. Our additives make certain applications possible for customers in the first place – a small component with a very big effect. In other words, BYK is creating this change process. In automotive coatings, for example, we help customers replace solvents with water. Another example of sustainability: In the automotive industry, baking temperatures are a big issue. Our additives help to lower baking temperatures. Which means considerable savings for car manufacturers in terms of energy.

In the field of electromobility, BYK has been working on substances that make lithium-ion batteries more efficient.

BOINOWITZ That's correct. It's what's called a dispersant, which you add when you manufacture the electrode materials. As a result, these materials can be produced with less energy intensity.

And when will I benefit from this as a potential e-car customer?

BOINOWITZ If you buy the right battery, you can already benefit now. It's already on the market. This was really visionary; the idea was developed ten years ago. People at BYK were thinking about how we could contribute to electromobility. It was a collaboration with Japanese customers.

ALTANA intends to become climate-neutral by 2025. Is that possible?

BOINOWITZ We're on the right track. We just supplied a production facility in the Netherlands with biogas, installed a photovoltaic system, and in Wesel we're saving considerable amounts of natural gas and thus carbon dioxide with a new type of thermal afterburning system. It's a continuous improvement process.

Climate change is a major issue and also featured prominently in the German Bundestag election campaign. The main question during the campaign was how Germany can protect the environment yet remain an industrial power at the same time. What is your view on this?

BOINOWITZ The new government is facing a mammoth task, it's a crucial turning point. It's about making renewable energy available in sufficient quantities. I'm speaking more broadly now, for ALTANA, for the chemical industry. The industry is a real problem solver in this respect. But we need green electricity, which involves routes and capacities, which is an important prerequisite.

Mr. Boinowitz, you come from Buxtehude.

BOINOWITZ (Laughs). You've certainly done your research! Well, that is clearly true, so at least I was born there. I come from nearby. But I always like to say I come from Hamburg, which sounds better. And that's where I studied. I'm from northern Germany, and subsequently I went to the Ruhr region, to Duisburg, to do my doctorate. I did my doctorate in the field of electrochemistry. That was in 1992. In 1995, I started working for one of Evonik's predecessors, Goldschmidt AG.

Which also dealt with additives.

BOINOWITZ Absolutely. I got into classic R&D there.

R&D?

BOINOWITZ Research and development. I was on the road a lot, I probably had a thousand customer contacts, and was very close to the customers. That fits in quite well with BYK. I lived in Shanghai for two years, which also influenced me.

How so?

BOINOWITZ You learn a lot about the country, about the market, about another culture. But you also get ideas about how to manage a global organization, what things you have to pay attention to. Wesel is our center, our roots. On the other hand, we're a global market leader in many respects. You have to orchestrate all of this. It's always good to spend some time in a satellite and see something different.

You also think that mathematical and scientific subjects are underestimated in school education. What, in your opinion, is the reason for this?

BOINOWITZ Many people underestimate the importance of technology, even outside of the digital sector. Industry is often seen as old fashioned. The technology in simple everyday objects, in paints, in packaging, in batteries, is underestimated. Not enough attention is paid to it. And perhaps its importance is not taught sufficiently in chemistry classes, its relevance for solutions to future issues. Cutting carbon-dioxide emissions, climate protection – we will achieve these things through technologies, not only through self-limitation. I highly encourage people to familiarize themselves with these technologies in the future.

What sparked your passion for chemistry?

BOINOWITZ It wasn't in a basement laboratory (laughs). Well, I did have a chemistry set, but, more importantly, I had a very motivating chemistry teacher. I learned about chemistry experimentally, through good experiments, cool effects. What's really great in chemistry is that you explain the world with models. It's relatively three-dimensional, which has always interested me. Having seen the rapid progress made in chemistry over the last two centuries, I wanted to be part of it.

Do you live in Wesel?

BOINOWITZ I live in Essen. My wife works in Düsseldorf, so Essen is a good location for both of us. But I spend a lot of time in Wesel. I've spent the weekend here in Wesel and Xanten. The Lower Rhine region appeals to me. I do a lot of cycling, and this is a perfect place for that. The area has a very high quality of life.

THE INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY HENNING RASCHE

INFORMATION

Global network of affiliates

Worldwide BYK operates, according to its own information, production facilities in Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, the U.S, and China. The company is part of the ALTANA Group and employs more than 2,300 people worldwide.

Start The company's origins date back to 1873, when Heinrich Byk founded a factory in Berlin.