

SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION
(Release No. 34-90973; File No. SR-BOX-2021-02)

January 22, 2021

Self-Regulatory Organizations; BOX Exchange LLC; Notice of Filing and Immediate Effectiveness of a Proposed Rule Change to Adopt Temporary IM-2020-1 (Temporary Extension for Representatives to Function as Principals)

Pursuant to Section 19(b)(1) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (“Act” or “Exchange Act”)¹ and Rule 19b-4 thereunder,² notice is hereby given that on January 12, 2021, the BOX Exchange LLC (“BOX” or the “Exchange”) filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission (“SEC” or “Commission”) the proposed rule change as described in Items I and II below, which Items have been prepared by the Exchange. The Commission is publishing this notice to solicit comments on the proposed rule change from interested persons.

I. Self-Regulatory Organization’s Statement of the Terms of Substance of the Proposed Rule Change

The Exchange proposes to adopt temporary IM-2020-1 (Temporary Extension for Representatives to Function as Principals). The text of the proposed rule change is available from the principal office of the Exchange, at the Commission’s Public Reference Room and also on the Exchange’s Internet website at <http://boxoptions.com>.

II. Self-Regulatory Organization’s Statement of the Purpose of, and Statutory Basis for, the Proposed Rule Change

In its filing with the Commission, the Exchange included statements concerning the purpose of, and basis for, the proposed rule change and discussed any comments it received on the proposed rule change. The text of those statements may be examined at the places specified in

¹ 15 U.S.C. 78s(b)(1).

² 17 CFR 240.19b-4.

Item IV below. The Exchange has prepared summaries, set forth in sections A, B, and C below, of the most significant parts of such statements.

A. Self-Regulatory Organization’s Statement of the Purpose of, and Statutory Basis for, the Proposed Rule Change

1. Purpose

The purpose of the proposed rule change is to adopt temporary IM-2020-1 (Temporary Extension for Representatives to Function as Principals). The proposed rule change would extend the 120-day period that certain individuals on the Exchange can function as a Principal without having successfully passed an applicable qualification examination through April 30, 2021,³ and would apply only to those individuals who were designated to function as a principal prior to January 1, 2021. This proposed rule change is based on a filing recently submitted by the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, Inc. (“FINRA”)⁴ and is intended to harmonize the Exchange’s registration rules with those of FINRA so as to promote uniform standards across the securities industry.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unpredictable, exogenous event that has resulted in unavoidable disruptions to the securities industry and impacted Participant firms, regulators, investors and other stakeholders. In response to COVID-19, earlier this year FINRA began

³ If BOX wishes to provide additional temporary relief from the rule requirements identified in this proposed rule change beyond April 30, 2021, BOX will submit a separate rule filing to further extend the temporary extension of time.

⁴ See Exchange Act Release No. 90617 (December 9, 2020), 85 FR 81258 (December 15, 2020) (SR-FINRA-2020-043) (the “FINRA Filing”). The Exchange notes that the FINRA Filing also provides temporary relief to individuals registered with FINRA as Operations Professionals under FINRA Rule 1220. The Exchange does not have a registration category for Operations Professionals and therefore, the Exchange is not proposing to adopt that aspect of the FINRA Filing.

providing temporary relief by way of frequently asked questions (“FAQs”)⁵ to address disruptions to the administration of FINRA qualification examinations caused by the pandemic that have significantly limited the ability of individuals to sit for examinations due to Prometric test center capacity issues.⁶

FINRA published the first FAQ on March 20, 2020, providing that individuals who were designated to function as principals under FINRA Rule 1210.04⁷ prior to February 2, 2020, would be given until May 31, 2020, to pass the appropriate principal qualification examination.⁸

⁵ See <https://www.finra.org/rules-guidance/key-topics/covid-19/faq#qe>.

⁶ At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, all FINRA qualification examinations were administered at test centers operated by Prometric. Based on the health and welfare concerns resulting from COVID-19, in March Prometric closed all of its test centers in the United States and Canada and began to slowly reopen some of them at limited capacity in May. Currently, Prometric has resumed testing in many of its United States and Canada test centers, at either full or limited occupancy, based on local and government mandates.

⁷ BOX Rule 2020(d) is similar to FINRA Rule 1210.04. The Exchange notes there are several differences between its rule text and FINRA’s rule. FINRA’s rule provides that registered persons under the rule must have at least 18 months of experience functioning as a representative within a five-year period immediately preceding their designation as principal, and the person must have fulfilled all applicable prerequisite registration, fee and examination requirements prior to their designation as principal. The Exchange’s rule does not have similar qualifying prerequisites. Unlike the Exchange’s rule text, FINRA’s rule also provides that the requirements of the rule apply to any principal category, and persons registered as an “Order Processing Assistant Representative”, or a “Foreign Associate” are not eligible to be designated as a principal under the rule. Lastly, FINRA’s rule also accounts for situations in which a person registered as a principal can function in another principal category for a period of 120 calendar days prior to passing an appropriate qualification examination. The Exchange believes these differences are minor in substance and do not materially impact this proposal. Specifically, the Exchange simply seeks to adopt similar relief in regards to its examination requirements for representatives functioning as principals, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁸ FINRA Rule 1210.04 (Requirements for Registered Persons Functioning as Principals for a Limited Period) allows a member firm to designate certain individuals to function in a principal capacity for 120 calendar days before having to pass an appropriate principal qualification examination. BOX Rule 2020(d) provides the same allowance to Participants.

On May 19, 2020, FINRA extended the relief to pass the appropriate examination until June 30, 2020. On June 29, 2020, FINRA again extended the temporary relief providing that individuals who were designated to function as principals under FINRA Rule 1210.04 prior to May 4, 2020, would be given until August 31, 2020, to pass the appropriate principal qualification examination. On August 28, 2020, FINRA again extended the temporary relief to pass the principal qualification examinations until December 31, 2020.⁹

The COVID-19 conditions necessitating the extension of relief provided in the FINRA FAQ continue to persist and in fact appear to be worsening.¹⁰ One of the impacts of COVID-19 continues to be serious interruptions in the administration of FINRA qualification examinations at Prometric test centers and the limited ability of individuals to sit for the examinations.¹¹ Although Prometric has been reopening its test centers, Prometric's safety practices mean that currently not all test centers are open, some of the open test centers are at limited capacity, and some open test centers are delivering only certain examinations that have been deemed essential by the local government.¹² Furthermore, Prometric has had to close some reopened test centers due to incidents of COVID-19 cases. The initial nationwide closure in March along with the inability to fully reopen all Prometric test centers due to COVID-19 have led to a significant

⁹ See Exchange Act Release No. 89732 (September 1, 2020), 85 FR 55535 (September 8, 2020) (SR-FINRA-2020-026).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Meryl Kornfield, Jacqueline Dupree, Marisa Iati, Paulina Villegas, Siobhan O'Grady and Hamza Shaban, New daily coronavirus cases in U.S. rise to 145,000, latest all-time high, Wash. Post, November 11, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/11/11/coronavirus-covid-live-updates-us/>.

¹¹ Information about continued impact of COVID-19 on FINRA-administered examinations is available at <https://www.finra.org/rules-guidance/key-topics/covid-19/exams>

¹² Information from Prometric about its safety practices and the impact of COVID-19 on its operations is available at <https://www.prometric.com/corona-virus-update>. See also *id.*

backlog of individuals who are waiting to sit for FINRA examinations that are not available online, including the General Securities Principal Exam (Series 24).¹³

In addition, firms are continuing to experience operational challenges with much of their personnel working from home due to shelter-in-place orders, restrictions on businesses and social activity imposed in various states, and adherence to other social distancing guidelines consistent with the recommendations of public health officials.¹⁴ As a result, firms continue to face potentially significant disruptions to their normal business operations that may include a limitation of in-person activities and staff absenteeism as a result of the health and welfare concerns stemming from COVID-19. Such potential disruptions may be further exacerbated and may even affect client services if firms cannot continue to keep principal positions filled as they may have difficulty finding other qualified individuals to transition into these roles or may need to reallocate employee time and resources away from other critical responsibilities at the firm.

These ongoing, extenuating circumstances make it impracticable for Participants to ensure that the individuals whom they have designated to function in a principal capacity, as set forth in BOX Rule 2020(d), are able to successfully sit for and pass an appropriate qualification examination within the 120-calendar day period required under the rule, or to find other qualified staff to fill this position. The ongoing circumstances also require individuals to be exposed to the health risks associated with taking an in-person examination, because the General Securities Principal examination is not available online. Therefore, the Exchange is proposing to continue

¹³ Earlier this year, an online test delivery service was launched for candidates seeking to take qualification examination remotely. Only certain qualification examinations are available online. See supra note 11. FINRA is considering making additional qualification examinations available remotely on a limited basis.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, How to Protect Yourself & Others, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>.

the temporary relief provided through the FINRA FAQs and FINRA's subsequent rule filings¹⁵ by adopting IM-2020-1 to extend the 120-day period during which an individual can function as a principal before having to pass an applicable qualification examination until April 30, 2021. The proposed rule change would apply only to those individuals who were designated to function as a principal prior to January 1, 2021. Any individuals designated to function as a principal on or after January 1, 2021, would need to successfully pass an appropriate qualification examination within 120 days.

The Exchange believes that this proposed extension of time is tailored to address the needs and constraints on a Participant's operations during the COVID19 pandemic, without significantly compromising critical investor protection. The proposed extension of time will help to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on Participants by providing continued flexibility so that Participants can ensure that principal positions remain filled. The potential risks from the proposed extension of the 120-day period are mitigated by the Participant's continued requirement to supervise the activities of these designated individuals and ensure compliance with federal securities laws and regulations, as well as the Exchange's rules.

2. Statutory Basis

The Exchange believes that the proposal is consistent with the requirements of Section 6(b) of the Act,¹⁶ in general, and Section 6(b)(5) of the Act,¹⁷ in particular, because it is designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices, to promote just and equitable principles of trade, to foster cooperation and coordination with persons engaged in facilitating

¹⁵ See supra notes 4 and 9.

¹⁶ 15 U.S.C. 78f(b).

¹⁷ 15 U.S.C. 78f(b)(5).

transactions in securities, to remove impediments to, and perfect the mechanism of, a free and open market and a national market system and, in general, to protect investors and the public interest.

The proposed rule change is intended to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on Participant operations by extending the 120-day period certain individuals may function as a principal without having successfully passed an appropriate qualification examination under BOX Rule 2020(d) until April 30, 2021. The proposed rule change does not relieve Participants from maintaining, under the circumstances, a reasonably designed system to supervise the activities of their associated persons to achieve compliance with applicable securities laws and regulations, and with applicable BOX rules that directly serve investor protection. In a time when faced with unique challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Exchange believes that the proposed rule change is a sensible accommodation that will continue to afford Participants the ability to ensure that critical positions are filled and client services maintained, while continuing to serve and promote the protection of investors and the public interest in this unique environment.

B. Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement on Burden on Competition

The Exchange does not believe that the proposed rule change will impose any burden on competition that is not necessary or appropriate in furtherance of the purposes of the Exchange Act. The proposed rule change is intended to provide temporary relief given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and to also maintain consistency with the rules of other self-regulatory organizations ("SROs") with respect to the registration requirements applicable to Participants and their registered personnel. In that regard, the Exchange believes that any burden on competition would be clearly outweighed by providing Participants with temporary relief in this unique

environment while also ensuring clear and consistent requirements applicable across SROs and mitigating any risk of SROs implementing different standards in these important areas. In its filing, FINRA notes that the proposed rule change is necessary to temporarily rebalance the attendant benefits and costs of the obligations under FINRA Rule 1210 in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is equally applicable to the changes the Exchange proposes.¹⁸ The Exchange accordingly incorporates FINRA's abbreviated economic impact assessment by reference.

C. Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement on Comments on the Proposed Rule Change Received from Members, Participants, or Others

Written comments were neither solicited nor received.

III. Date of Effectiveness of the Proposed Rule Change and Timing for Commission Action

Because the foregoing proposed rule change does not: (i) significantly affect the protection of investors or the public interest; (ii) impose any significant burden on competition; and (iii) become operative for 30 days from the date on which it was filed, or such shorter time as the Commission may designate, it has become effective pursuant to Section 19(b)(3)(A) of the Act¹⁹ and Rule 19b-4(f)(6) thereunder.²⁰

A proposed rule change filed under Rule 19b-4(f)(6) normally does not become operative for 30 days after the date of filing. However, pursuant to Rule 19b-4(f)(6)(iii), the Commission may designate a shorter time if such action is consistent with the protection of investors and the

¹⁸ See FINRA Filing, 85 FR at 81260.

¹⁹ 15 U.S.C. 78s(b)(3)(A).

²⁰ 17 CFR 240.19b-4(f)(6). In addition, Rule 19b-4(f)(6)(iii) requires a self-regulatory organization to give the Commission written notice of its intent to file the proposed rule change, along with a brief description and text of the proposed rule change, at least five business days prior to the date of filing of the proposed rule change, or such shorter time as designated by the Commission. The Exchange has satisfied this requirement.

public interest. The Exchange has asked the Commission to waive the 30-day operative delay so that the proposed rule change may become operative immediately upon filing. As noted above, the Exchange stated that the proposed extension of time will help minimize the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on Participants' operations by allowing them to keep principal positions filled and minimizing disruptions to client services and other critical responsibilities. The Exchange further stated that the ongoing extenuating circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic make it impractical to ensure that individuals designated to act in these capacities are able to take and pass the appropriate qualification examination during the 120-calendar day period required under the rules. The Exchange also explained that shelter-in-place orders, restrictions on business and social activity, and adherence to social distancing guidelines consistent with the recommendations of public officials remain in place in various states.²¹ In addition, the Exchange observed that, following a nationwide closure of all test centers earlier in the year, some test centers have re-opened, but are operating at limited capacity or are only delivering certain examinations that have been deemed essential by the local government.²² Although, as the Exchange noted, FINRA has launched an online test delivery service to help address this backlog, the General Securities Principal (Series 24) Examination is not available online.²³ Nevertheless, the Exchange explained that the proposed rule change will provide needed flexibility to ensure that these positions remain filled and is tailored to address the constraints on

²¹ See supra note 14.

²² See supra notes 11 and 12. The Exchange states that Prometric has also had to close some reopened test centers due to incidents of COVID-19 cases.

²³ See supra note 13. FINRA is considering making additional qualification examinations available remotely on a limited basis.

Participants' operations during the COVID-19 pandemic without significantly compromising critical investor protection.²⁴

The Commission observes that the Exchange's proposal, like FINRA's analogous filing, provides only temporary relief from the requirement to pass certain qualification examinations within the 120-day period in the rules. As proposed, this relief would extend the 120-day period that certain individuals can function as principals through April 30, 2021. If a further extension of temporary relief from the rule requirements identified in this proposal beyond April 30, 2021 is required, the Exchange noted that it may submit a separate rule filing to extend the effectiveness of the temporary relief under these rules.²⁵ For these reasons, the Commission believes that waiver of the 30-day operative delay is consistent with the protection of investors and the public interest.²⁶ Accordingly, the Commission hereby waives the 30-day operative delay and designates the proposal operative upon filing.²⁷

At any time within 60 days of the filing of the proposed rule change, the Commission summarily may temporarily suspend such rule change if it appears to the Commission that such action is necessary or appropriate in the public interest, for the protection of investors, or otherwise in furtherance of the purposes of the Exchange Act. If the Commission takes such

²⁴ The Exchange states that Participants remain subject to the continued requirement to supervise the activities of these designated individuals and ensure compliance with federal securities laws and regulations, as well as BOX rules.

²⁵ See supra note 3.

²⁶ As noted above by the Exchange, this proposed temporary change is based on a recent filing by FINRA that the Commission approved with a waiver of the 30-day operative delay. See FINRA Filing, 85 FR at 81260.

²⁷ For purposes only of waiving the 30-day operative delay, the Commission has considered the proposed rule change's impact on efficiency, competition, and capital formation. See 15 U.S.C. 78c(f).

action, the Commission shall institute proceedings to determine whether the proposed rule should be approved or disapproved.

IV. Solicitation of Comments

Interested persons are invited to submit written data, views and arguments concerning the foregoing, including whether the proposed rule change is consistent with the Exchange Act.

Comments may be submitted by any of the following methods:

Electronic Comments:

- Use the Commission's Internet comment form (<http://www.sec.gov/rules/sro.shtml>); or
- Send an e-mail to rule-comments@sec.gov. Please include File Number SR-BOX-2021-02 on the subject line.

Paper Comments:

- Send paper comments in triplicate to Secretary, Securities and Exchange Commission, 100 F Street, NE, Washington, DC 20549-1090.

All submissions should refer to File Number SR-BOX-2021-02. This file number should be included on the subject line if e-mail is used. To help the Commission process and review your comments more efficiently, please use only one method. The Commission will post all comments on the Commission's Internet website (<http://www.sec.gov/rules/sro.shtml>). Copies of the submission, all subsequent amendments, all written statements with respect to the proposed rule change that are filed with the Commission, and all written communications relating to the proposed rule change between the Commission and any person, other than those that may be withheld from the public in accordance with the provisions of 5 U.S.C. 552, will be available for website viewing and printing in the Commission's Public Reference Room, 100 F Street, NE, Washington, DC 20549, on official business days between the hours of 10:00 a.m.

and 3:00 p.m. Copies of such filing also will be available for inspection and copying at the principal office of BOX. All comments received will be posted without change. Persons submitting comments are cautioned that we do not redact or edit personal identifying information from comment submissions. You should submit only information that you wish to make available publicly. All submissions should refer to File Number SR-BOX-2021-02 and should be submitted on or before [insert date 21 days from publication in the Federal Register].

For the Commission, by the Division of Trading and Markets, pursuant to delegated authority.²⁸

J. Matthew DeLesDernier
Assistant Secretary

²⁸ 17 CFR 200.30-3(a)(12).