Survey respondents had no doubt about the treatment for the industry’s problems: information sharing. “Be open and transparent,” one recommended. “Communicate to the public the worth of what companies are doing without over-hyping and driving up expectations,” another suggested. That message has plainly got through to the top employers, exemplified by sanofi-aventis: “We understand that we have to fully articulate the economic and social value of our products,” says Cluzel.

Perceptions of the industry aren’t entirely negative. Respondents noted the positive impact of general advances in health care. These include the ability to bring new, innovative products to the market; progress in oncology, such as the approval of Genentech’s drug Avastin for breast cancer and advances in the use of gene therapy, despite some setbacks; continuing progress in research on stem cells; the emergence of treatments for previously untreated diseases; and solutions for food and fuel shortages, such as biocrops and biofuels.

Putting the Patient First
Bischofberger points to the impact of successful research on one key disease. “The antiretroviral treatments now available mean it is possible for a young person diagnosed with HIV today to have an estimated survival rate of approximately 35 years,” he says. Like Gilead, other top employers accentuate the positive aspects of the life science industry by performing their R&D in entirely new areas. “We’re very progressive in terms of our innovative approach to health care,” Gregory of Genzyme says. “We’re definitely trying not to be a me-too company.”

Lilly’s Paul points out the fundamental philosophy that garners a positive perception of the industry. “Put the patient first across the entire value chain, from R&D to marketing,” he advises. “If you come to work every day to do what’s right for patients and to develop drugs with that in mind, you’ll be successful.”

That approach reflects the attitude of survey takers to another aspect of the industry: the field’s attraction to scientists. The main advantage of working in the life science industry, respondents reported, is the chance to make a difference, by performing work that brings the reward of helping people. “One of the most important driving forces for individuals is being empowered to take responsibility for projects on an individual basis as part of a team,” Boehringer Ingelheim’s Schnorrenberg says. “We are striving to encourage scientists and coach them.”

Working in the life science industry is not without drawbacks. More than a quarter of the survey’s respondents reported that they are fairly likely, very likely, or extremely likely to seek a different job. Most quoted job insecurity as their reason. That stems in large part from corporate mergers and acquisitions, restructuring, and outsourcing.

Several top employers have a policy of minimizing those causes of uncertainty. “We are very conservative in our hiring,” Genentech’s Scheller says. “The good part is that we won’t have large layoffs. The downside is that, when a clinical trial works and promises large revenues, we have to stimulate our research very quickly.” Lilly has purposely avoided major mergers and acquisitions. “We decided that we didn’t need to become too much larger through merging with a large company,” Paul says. “We will continue to grow organically through small mergers and acquisitions.”

A Stable Environment

Life science companies can’t always avoid some insecurity stimulated by change. For them, the guiding principle is to minimize personnel dislocations. “Our executive team has articulated a company strategy that puts acquisitions into the context of our mission,” Monsanto’s Padgette says. At Genzyme, Gregory adds, “We have done a number of mergers and acquisitions, but we have maintained our culture of innovation and collaboration. As we add new talent to our work force, we allow our people to stay with projects or to move on to suitable new projects. We are all working together toward the larger goal of making sure every patient who needs therapy is treated.”

EMD Serono and Millennium have the most recent experience of change, having undergone acquisition early in 2007 and in May 2008, respectively. “The acquisition [of Serono] allowed us to redefine processes, examine our pipeline and research initiatives, and define our core therapeutic areas,” Kirschbaum says. “As a result, we have a strong, attractive pipeline strategically aligned within the organization’s core objectives.” Before Takeda acquired Millennium, both companies made sure that they were, in Gansler’s words, “a great cultural fit.” Beyond that, he continues, “Takeda made it clear that the transaction was about growth and not synergies. They also made it clear how they valued Millennium’s employees, putting retention bonuses in place. So the issue of job security didn’t arise.”

Gilead’s Bischofberger defines the tightrope that corporate executives must negotiate as they plan the future. “This is certainly a dynamic and competitive industry, and change—good, bad, and in between—is constantly taking place and always will be taking place,” he says. “What is a constant for us is our focus on developing and delivering innovative treatments for unmet medical needs and making sure that our employees have a work environment that inspires a commitment to this mission.”

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