

‘Like playing the lottery’: Laid-off biopharmaceutical workers give a snapshot of a cooling-down sector

Some unemployed workers land new jobs in days, but others are still looking

By [Jonathan Saltzman](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 10, 2023, 5:54 a.m.



Robert Janoschek at Nara Park in Acton walked with his dogs. Janoschek is among hundreds of employees who were laid off from Sunovion Pharmaceuticals in Marlborough recently. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Gina Calvanese got laid off from Jounce Therapeutics, a struggling Cambridge biotech, in April but landed a higher-paying, six-figure administrative job at a Boston drug maker within days.

Dwight Morrow was let go by Rubius Therapeutics five months before it shut down in February. But the veteran scientist quickly moved to a small startup and then got a high-ranking job at Moderna, one of the state's biggest biotechs, all without leaving Cambridge.

Robert Janoschek hasn't fared as well. He lost his job at Sunovion Pharmaceuticals in Marlborough after its Japanese parent restructured its US subsidiaries. He has applied for hundreds of jobs at other drug companies since April, he said, but can't find anything he wants.

"It's stunning to see how many other people are applying for the same job," said Janoschek, who once counted 917 aspirants for an opening on LinkedIn. "This is like playing the lottery."

Calvanese, Morrow, and Janoschek are among thousands of Massachusetts biopharmaceutical workers laid off in the past two years in what experts describe as one of the industry's biggest [shakeouts](#) in decades. Their experiences provide a snapshot of a sector settling down after years of hope and hype.

The state's biotech scene exploded in the mid-2010s and early in the pandemic as exuberant investors disregarded the high failure rate in drug development and bet on buzzy technologies such as gene editing and messenger RNA vaccines. When the inevitable setbacks occurred — roughly 90 percent of experimental drugs fizzle out in clinical trials — investments plunged and [firms shut down or shed workers](#).

To be sure, the life sciences sector remains robust, a major pillar of the economy, and companies are generally happy to pick up talent cast aside. But the drumbeat of layoffs in 2022 has only grown louder this year.

At least 56 drug firms based in Massachusetts (or with operations here) have made layoffs or closed in 2023 through September, according to Dan Gold, president of Fairway Consulting Group, a life sciences recruiting firm. He estimated US biopharma firms cut about 6,000 jobs in 2022 and 11,000 so far this year. Roughly one-third of the layoffs have been in Massachusetts, he said.

Many factors play a role in how quickly laid-off workers find new positions, industry observers say, including their areas of expertise, the salaries they are seeking, and their reputations in the state's tight-knit drug-making sector.

Scientists who develop drugs to treat cancers, neurological conditions, and rare diseases are especially in demand, Gold said, as are people with expertise in creating vaccines. Workers with experience in dealing with the Food and Drug Administration are also a hot commodity.

And although many companies are making layoffs, others are expanding. Overall employment in Massachusetts biopharma increased 6.9 percent to about 114,000 in 2022, compared to nearly 107,000 the year before, according to a [report released Sept.](#)

[6](#) by industry association MassBio. Because the job totals were reported as of Dec. 31, the trade group's snapshot didn't reflect layoffs this year.

Morrow, the scientist who ended up at vaccine maker Moderna, had already survived at least one round of layoffs at Rubius when he learned in September 2022 that he would lose his job as a vice president.



Moderna, which makes messenger RNA vaccines for COVID, is now the biggest Massachusetts-based biopharma employer. ADAM GLANZMAN/BLOOMBERG

He had worked at drug companies since the late 1990s, including nearly 16 years at British pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline, and had never been laid off before.

“I was bummed,” said Morrow, 62, who oversaw drug development technologies at Rubius, which wanted to turn red blood cells into potent new medicines. “But I was confident I was going to find something else.”

He was contacted by several executive-level headhunters before he left Rubius and landed a similar job as a vice president at Parallel Bio, a small startup. He left Parallel in June to become executive director of biological sciences at Moderna, which makes messenger RNA vaccines for COVID and is now the biggest Massachusetts-based biopharma employer. It has nearly 4,200 workers in the state, according to MassBio.

A long list of other biotechs have shuttered this year or plan to, including Jounce; Frequency Therapeutics, and Cyteir Therapeutics, both of Lexington; and Magenta Therapeutics and Intergalactic Therapeutics, both of Cambridge.

“I’ve never seen this many companies fold in such a short period of time,” said Kara Coluccio, managing partner of Perspective Group, a Cambridge company that recruits executives for life sciences firms. “There are a lot of companies folding that probably shouldn’t have been formed in the first place.”

Other companies are still in business but have shed workers because of FDA decisions. In August, Sage Therapeutics said it will lay off about 40 percent of its workforce, roughly 275 employees, after regulators approved the Cambridge biotech’s new drug for postpartum depression but not for major depressive disorder, a far bigger market. (Sage had developed the drug with Biogen.)

Around town, workers’ experiences finding new jobs have varied widely.

Calvanese, 31, said she was “very shocked” when Jounce laid her off in April from her job as an executive assistant to the chief executive and chief financial officer.

“I wasn’t even there fully a year, so I was still trying to wrap my brain around what we did scientifically,” said Calvanese, who lives in South Boston.

Jounce had made a round of layoffs several weeks earlier, she said, but she was among 40 employees retained as the startup sought a buyer. Not long afterward, Jounce chief

executive Rich Murray held a company meeting to say that another firm had agreed to acquire the startup but was laying everyone off.

Calvanese immediately contacted a recruiter and got interviews with four companies. She took a job with Tango Therapeutics, which is developing cancer treatments. She is now manager of administration and executive assistant to the chief executive, Barbara Weber.

And it didn't hurt that Calvanese's six-figure salary exceeds what she was earning at Jounce, she said.

But other workers, like Janoschek, have struggled to find a job they want.

Janoschek, 56, had worked for Sunovion and a predecessor firm for 22 years and lost his job in March in a restructuring that shed hundreds of workers. The big blow to Sunovion, he said, was the loss of patent protection for Latuda, its best-selling schizophrenia drug, which led to competition from cheaper generic medicines.

As associate director of manufacturing sciences and technology, Janoschek acted as a liaison between Sunovion and companies that made its medicines in the United States and overseas. He said he has applied for similar positions at other drug firms at a pay range of \$180,000 to \$210,000 a year, less than what he was earning at Sunovion.

He has had several interviews but received only one offer, from a biotech startup. He wasn't interested. "Having done the startup thing before [in the early 1990s], where it's a lot of 80-hour work weeks, I'm not sure I wanted to do that," he said.

He wonders whether being in his mid-50s is hurting his chances. But, he said, he's not worried about money at this point.

"The severance package that I received from Sunovion was very generous and will tide me over until December," he said. "That said, would I rather have a position? Absolutely."

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