Drug Keytruda with mRNA-based personalized cancer vaccines made by Moderna. Moderna has also paired with Vertex Pharmaceuticals (ranked No. 5 in this year’s list), to discover and develop mRNA therapies for cystic fibrosis patients who have a dysfunctional cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) protein or are missing it altogether.

Both of these collaborations combine the deep disease expertise and experience of a partner with Moderna’s core technology to try to develop breakthrough treatments, says Stephen Hoge, president of Moderna. “We know our technology. But we also understand that we need help from others who know the most about a given disease. So we look to partner wherever we believe it can improve our chance of getting medicines to patients.”

Moderna’s leaders like to point out that although the company feels cozy and young like a startup, it has the resources of a much larger operation. As of September, Moderna had US$1.4 billion in cash assets on hand—due in no small part to these alliances—to invest in its large and diverse pipeline for drug development.

“We don’t have to limit ourselves. The financial backing we have enables us to move fast and do the right experiments,” says Benefato. “That’s unique about Moderna.”

Likewise, Yancopoulos calls Regeneron’s alliance with Geisinger Health Systems “a perfect marriage.” Regeneron gains access to high-quality medical records and patient DNA, and in return, Geisinger gets detailed genetic information that helps them improve and anticipate health care for patients.

Stretching keeps careers limber

Overall, job satisfaction is high among R&D industry workers. Only one-fifth of survey respondents said they were likely to search for a new position in the next year. But more than half of those (54%) gave “career advancement,” “professional growth,” or “seeking new experiences” as the reason behind their potential move. Top employer firms keep employees engaged and challenged by catering to researchers’ restless minds.

“All scientists love learning new things, and people learn in different ways,” notes Adam Kievan, head of talent management for Moderna. And so Moderna University, the company’s professional development program, increases its offerings by the day. This fall, employees can choose between a 30-hour clinical lecture series on genome evolution, workshops on building a professional brand, and talks on leading group members through change.

Lilly caterers to scientists who want to climb the career ladder without becoming the dreaded “M” word—management. The technical ladder track allows researchers to take on more leadership within the company and be promoted for their technical expertise.

Distinguished research fellow Henry Bryant, an immunologist, has hit the pinnacle of the technical ladder at Lilly, with a position equivalent to a senior vice president. He can influence company direction and strategy, he says, but still spends most of his time “dreaming up experiments to unravel a key question, seeing the results, and redesigning.”

He also says that Lilly’s breadth allows employees to make lateral or geographic moves that advance their professional growth. Employees can do work exchanges for six months to two years at another R&D site such as New York, San Diego, Shanghai, the United Kingdom, or Spain. “Working on diabetes in China, employees get to see that it’s a very different disease there than it is in the United States,” Bryant says.

Merck employees have opportunities to work across the company’s three business sectors, Healthcare, Life Science, and the company’s Performance Materials, says Kai Beckmann, chief administration officer. For example, the materials and health care teams are collaborating on the LicriEye project, which aims to develop a cataract treatment using a liquid crystal–based lens.

Merck’s globalization means that the company puts a high priority on diversity and inclusiveness among its employees, who are drawn from 122 different nationalities. Merck sees gender, age, and cultural diversity as a source of competitive advantage that brings the right set of people to the conference table to meet challenges, says Garijo. Women make up 41% of the Merck workforce and hold 27% of the company’s upper management positions.

“Our talent pool has grown to match the dynamics of our business,” says Garijo. Keeping that talent pool engaged and productive while preventing burnout and stress are key to retaining the best scientists. “We are not only a family-owned company, but a family-oriented company. Work–life balance is one of our top priorities and one of the most important factors bringing people to Merck today.”

Promoting better balance

The fact that a growing portion of the industry’s workforce comes from the Millennial generation means that many employees grew up with a smartphone in their hands and are used to maintaining a constant connection to their work colleagues, family, and friends. That connectivity can be both a boon to productivity and a fast track to burnout. Top employers have figured out how to help their researchers integrate their work and home lives so that projects proceed and time off is protected and restful.

At Regeneron and Novo Nordisk, leaders recognize that fast-paced work carries a higher risk for employee exhaustion, so they encourage taking personal time and working from home when possible. They also carve out a hard boundary around weekends and vacation time.

Two years ago, Novartis introduced some forced downtime into its yearly calendar, reserving two weeks in the middle of summer for a company-wide break from formal meetings. This