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Panning for gold

In the nineteenth century, fortune seekers headed to California to pan for gold. In the late twentieth century, hopeful scientists flocked there to prospect for proteins. Since then, other parts of the world have joined the biotech rush — often looking to the San Francisco Bay Area for cues about where and how to dig for new compounds and build new companies. But the original blueprint that the site of biotech's genesis provided to the world has changed dramatically — and with it the dynamics of employment there (see page 4).

For example, when Genentech helped to launch the biotech era 25 years ago, the company was relatively small and it staked its claim with one putative product. Now, the company — with its thousands of employees, multiple therapies on the market and several in the pipeline — more closely resembles a pharmaceutical giant than a start-up. The same is true for other more established companies such as Chiron.

Further blurring the distinction between biotech and pharmaceutical companies, many of the early northern California biotechs are owned at least partially by pharmaceutical concerns. Many of the newer ones were formed as the result of a partnership with, or as spin-offs from, other companies.

Within this protean landscape, the future of California biotech is being reshaped yet again. Several major investments in new university programmes and buildings, which will probably trigger another round of start-ups, spin-offs and tie-ins, look set to boost the employment market in an already crowded, yet prosperous, region. Other regions of the world looking to the Bay Area biotech model may want to ask themselves which Bay Area they're basing their plans upon: the one that was, that is, or is to come.

Paul Smaglik

Naturejobs editor



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