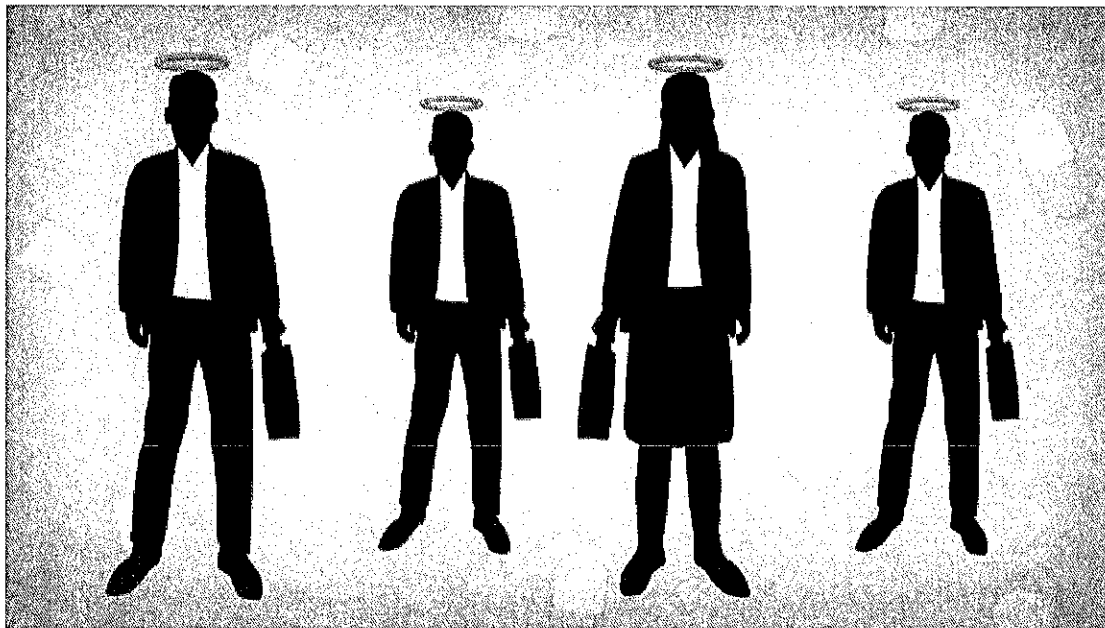


Here are the nominees for best biopharma CEO of 2020

By [Adam Feuerstein](#)² [@adamfeuerstein](#)³

December 15, 2020



Hyacinth Empinado/STAT

A year like no other requires a new way of drafting a list of Best Biopharma CEOs.

For 2020 — the 13th iteration of this list — Covid needed its own category. The worst public health crisis of our lives has triggered an unprecedented response from biotech and pharma companies developing vaccines and drugs against the novel coronavirus. This effort has dominated everything else.

But the normal work of biopharma continues, thankfully. So, for 2020, I have come up with two lists: one for CEOs whose companies have played a role in the development of Covid vaccines and one for CEOs whose companies have focused their attention on other important efforts.

As in previous years, you'll have the opportunity to vote for your favorite non-Covid CEO at the end of this post. Our champion will be announced on Friday. We'll also announce our best Covid CEO then.

Oh, and stay tuned for my list of the worst CEO nominees, coming Wednesday.

The best "Covid" biopharma CEOs of 2020 are:

Albert Bourla, Pfizer

Last spring, in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, a friend asked me which of the many vaccine candidates rushed into development would most likely succeed. I said Pfizer, not because I had any expertise in vaccinology, but simply because stopping the most deadly, world-crushing viral outbreak in a century was a job particularly well-suited for the largest, wealthiest, and most experienced pharma company in the world.

A look ahead at biotech in 2021

Under Albert Bourla's leadership, Pfizer developed, tested, manufactured — and is now distributing — a Covid-19 vaccine. The execution was nearly flawless, accomplished in record time.

Bourla's 27-year Pfizer career prepared him for this moment. As chief operating officer and then chief executive officer, Bourla sold off older, underperforming businesses and shifted resources and attention to research and novel drug development. The goal was to transform Pfizer from a lumbering pharma giant into a slimmer, more effective developer of innovative medicines.

“These are deliberate steps we are taking to make Pfizer a very different company and one that is even better-equipped to fulfill our purpose: breakthroughs that change patients' lives,” Bourla told investors in January 2019, just after taking over as CEO.

Purpose, fulfilled.

Ugur Sahin, BioNTech

Last January, soon after learning about the coronavirus outbreak in China, Ugur Sahin directed BioNTech scientists — experts in the genetic technology called messenger RNA, or mRNA — to shift their priorities toward the development of a Covid vaccine. By March, BioNTech scientists had created several promising candidates, but the company, small and relatively inexperienced, lacked the resources and expertise needed to rapidly conduct clinical trials or establish large-scale manufacturing capacity

Sahin turned to Pfizer. A partnership was established in March, expanding on an existing pact set up in 2018 to work jointly on a flu vaccine. Together, the relatively unknown German biotech and the global pharma giant would co-develop a Covid vaccine. At that time, no vaccine or drug based on mRNA had ever won approval.

History will show that those two strategic decisions made by Sahin in the early months of 2020 helped turn the tide against the novel coronavirus.

Stéphane Bancel, Moderna

Stephane Bancel is not a scientist by training. He did not invent the idea to harness mRNA to fight disease. But today, there is no person on this planet more closely aligned with the groundbreaking technology, its potential to transform the development of medicine, and generate billions of dollars in profits.

Bancel has been a vocal mRNA evangelist since taking the CEO reins of Moderna in 2011. In the company's earliest days, Bancel's penchant for bold predictions were doubted, even mocked. The company had an insatiable appetite for fund-raising and a multibillion-dollar valuation that was disconnected from the paltry clinical data produced by its labs.

The pandemic changed everything for Moderna. Today, the company is days away from securing conditional approval for its mRNA-based Covid vaccine, which like the vaccine from Pfizer and BioNtech, has demonstrated remarkable efficacy against the novel coronavirus.

Moderna has more work to do before it can prove the full promise of mRNA as a new source of novel drugs, and not just vaccines. That in no way diminishes the incredible achievement of its Covid vaccine. Moderna is literally going to change the world.

So, yes, Bancel was right all along.

A footnote:

There's little doubt Bourla, Sahin and Bancel deserve "Best CEO" honors, but it's also undeniable that the honorific is built upon the tireless work of hundreds, if not thousands, of people. Three deserve special mention:

At Pfizer, **Kathrin Jansen**, senior vice president, head of vaccine research and development; at BioNTech, Co-Founder and Chief Medical Officer **Özlem Türeci**; and at Moderna, **Tal Zaks**, chief medical officer.

A second footnote:

Vaccines won't be enough to end the pandemic, for that we'll also need drugs to treat people who become sick with Covid-19. So, "Best CEO" honorable mentions to Regeneron Pharma CEO **Len Schleifer** and Eli Lilly CEO **David Ricks** for the development of antibody-based treatments against Covid-19. Likewise, Gilead Sciences CEO **Dan O'Day** deserves much credit for the speed at which the company was able to develop and manufacture the antiviral medicine remdesivir.

The best "non-Covid" biopharma CEOs of 2020 are:

Behzad Aghazadeh, Immunomedics

For Immunomedics, the \$21 billion acquisition by Gilead Sciences in September was the capstone on a dramatic turnaround that began in 2016 when Behzad Aghazadeh first invested in the struggling cancer drug maker through his hedge fund, Avoro Capital Advisors.

When Avoro, then known as Venbio Select Advisors, first bought shares in Immunomedics, the company was worth just \$200 million — one-hundredth the acquisition price. That's an incredible return for the fund's investors and Immunomedics' long-term shareholders, but it didn't come easy.

It might be more accurate to call Aghazadeh a "reluctant best" CEO nominee, because fixing Immunomedics required him to oust the company's old executive team and take over its operations. The activist investor became CEO and later executive chairman. He hired an entirely new management team that ultimately secured the approval of its breast cancer drug, now called Trodelvy.

The success of Trodelvy — and its potential to treat other types of cancer — enticed Gilead to buy the company in one of the largest biotech M&A deals of the year.

Tassos Gianakakos, Myokardia

Good things happen to good people doing good science.

That's the best way to sum up Tassos Gianakakos' year. In May, Myokardia announced positive results from a Phase 3 clinical trial, showing that its experimental drug called mavacamten clearly improved the symptoms of patients with an inherited, progressive form of heart disease.

The strongly positive study results coupled with Myokardia's intention to seek the drug's approval doubled its stock price to more than \$100 per share. Myokardia had been developing mavacamten for eight years.

Then, in October, Bristol Myers Squibb swooped in to acquire Myokardia for \$13 billion in cash. The deal valued Myokardia at \$225 per share.

Sam Kulkarni, CRISPR Therapeutics

Editas Medicine, CRISPR Therapeutics, and Intellia Therapeutics are all leveraging the CRISPR/Cas9 gene-editing technology to develop potentially curative treatments for patients with inherited diseases. But for a long time, the early stages of their work made it hard to differentiate between the three publicly traded CRISPR companies.

That's no longer an issue. A big data year for CRISPR Therapeutics, led by Samarth "Sam" Kulkarni, has made it the clear front runner. In December, CRISPR and its partner Vertex Pharmaceuticals presented early but very encouraging clinical trial results showing that its one-time treatment called CTX001 was capable of curing sickle cell disease and beta-thalassemia. The data came two months after CRISPR co-founder Emmanuelle Charpentier shared the Nobel Prize in chemistry.

Editas and Intellia have also treated their first patients this year, but neither company has shown clinical trial results yet.

CTX001 is the first gene-editing treatment to emerge from CRISPR Therapeutics' pipeline with clinical data in patients. The company has also advanced other programs, showing early study data from a CRISPR-enabled cell therapy for patients with advanced B-cell lymphoma. Two more CRISPR cancer treatments are also in clinical trials.

Kulkarni is on a roll. He's not only managed to accelerate the development of CRISPR-based treatments to the point that CTX001 could be approved next year, but he's done it in a capital-efficient manner, unlike some of the free-spending gene therapy competitors that might soon be overtaken.

And now, here's your chance to vote:

About the Author



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