

**THE INTERVIEW:** JOHN POWERS, BALTIMORE BIOWORKS VICE PRESIDENT

# Building a middle class in biotech

Latest venture aims to train the new 'biotechnicians'

**BY GUS G. SENTEMENTES**  
The Baltimore Sun

Baltimore BioWorks is John Powers' third biotech company — and the one that he says he's most excited about.

The 56-year-old Ellicott City doctor built a career in biotechnology, working for the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, and more recently as an entrepreneur and consultant. He already built and sold two biotech companies in Maryland.

He's a minority investor in his latest venture, Baltimore BioWorks, which is taking an unusual tack in the biotechnology sector. The company will make and sell products used by other biotechnology companies in testing and production facilities, including such items as diagnostic kits, buffers and reagents.

But the company also is setting up a yearlong vocational program that will hire and train what Powers calls "biotechnicians" who'll fill the growing number of midlevel positions that biotechnology companies in Maryland are struggling to find workers for. Powers, who's a vice president at the company, will set up the vocational program with Louise Dalton, the firm's president.

Baltimore BioWorks' emphasis on job training attracted the eye of the philanthropic Abell Foundation, which invested in the company. The company has raised about \$1 million from investors and expects to launch by the end of the year.

It recently opened headquarters at the University of Maryland BioPark on Baltimore's west side, where it hopes to attract students from Baltimore City Community College. BCCC runs the



KENNETH K. LAM/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO

John Powers is flanked by Baltimore BioWorks colleagues Amrita Madabushi, assistant director of training and career development, and Carlos Thomas of the board of directors.

Life Sciences Institute for student education at the BioPark. The company will open a manufacturing and distribution facility near M&T Bank Stadium.

Powers recently talked about the plans for Baltimore BioWorks.

### **What's your idea with Baltimore BioWorks?**

The whole idea is to create a profitable biotech company that manufactures and distributes, and use those profits to hire and train vocational employees. All made in Baltimore.

### **Do you see a need for more midlevel technical workers in Maryland's biotechnology sector?**

In the state of Maryland, we have so many people with initials after their names, the PhDs, the MDs. We have workers for hourly [lower skilled] jobs. What we don't have is the middle. We don't have people who know how to set up equipment, who can do quality control work. We don't have people to operate certain machinery. We're missing the middle layer, the technician level.

### **What's your one-year vocational program all about then?**

Let's hire people who have a high school or [associates] degree. Give them their first job. They'll experience with us every facet of the biotech industry for their 12 months of training. Then we'll give them intensive training for two months in the area they like. We'll help the vocational employees find biotechnician jobs in the state of Maryland.

The whole purpose of BioWorks is to hire and train vocational employees and get them hired in Maryland — the same biotech companies that we hope will be our customers.

### **How real of a hiring problem is this?**

When you get to the big companies, they have their own training programs in place. The smaller companies do not. I've already run into two companies who would hire my entire first year's class.

### **How do you make money?**

We're going to hire and train these people based on the profits of the biotech manufacturing and distribution business. We're just going to hire excess employees and have a regimented training system. We'll have a collaboratively written training program by BCCC. They'll help us write the training materials. They'll get credit hours as we're training and paying them. The whole idea is we're going to give you your first job and your first training experience.

We'll hire them, train them, and give them experience. They'll go from a five-to-eight-dollar-an-hour job to being in the \$40,000 range. We're creating a middle class for those who want to be in the biotech industry in Maryland.

### **So what's your job in the company, as a vice president and minority investor?**

My job is to get it created, up and running and hand it to Louise and her crew. They have expertise in distribution. They'll get it done.

### **How many employees will you have at the beginning?**

We're going to start with eight. We'll have 12 at month four and 16 by the eighth month. For every million dollars in revenue, we'll bring on another vocational employee.

### **Why did you want to locate your headquarters in the BioPark?**

Here's the cool part: If there's a high-end training need, there's no sense in us going to buy all that stuff. Part of our vocational training may be putting our employees in a BCCC class. There's a huge collaborative and synergistic opportunity.

### **Will the company draw on any federal or state subsidies for workforce development?**

No. Hopefully we'll be the first in the world to build a biotechnician training company without federal or state assistance.

### **Why didn't you seek government assistance?**

You're talking about potentially years of applications. The reviews and control processes would not allow us the flexibility to do what we know needs to be done. The federal and state governments put their money into classic approaches, like schools. We want to have a bigger impact, faster. The United States as a whole doesn't really value vocational, paid employment training.

*gus.sentementes@baltsun.com*  
*twitter.com/gussent*