

Johannes's Hints for a Happy Working Relationship

February 17, 2025

1 Before working with me

1.1 Research Assistants

I regularly advertise positions for full-time research assistants, based either at the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics in Nairobi, or at Cornell. If you are interested in one of these positions, look for the postings in the J-PAL jobs database or on the Busara website. You can also email me to ask if I'm hiring; when there isn't an ad up normally the answer will be no, but it doesn't hurt to ask. When you email, please include your CV, transcripts, and SAT/GRE scores (for transcripts and scores, nothing formal is needed – screenshots or informal summaries are fine).

Here are the things I look for in RAs, in descending order of importance:

1. Econometrics/statistics training and experience. The more of this you have, the better. The importance of this item is difficult to overstate, and you are very unlikely to be competitive if you're not very good on this front. This also applies to coding skills, although there is more room for learning-by-doing here.
2. Good quantitative SAT/GRE scores. I typically look for quantitative GRE scores above 160, or quantitative SAT scores above 700. I'm aware of the problems that beset these tests, but they make comparisons across applicants easier, and give applicants from underprivileged backgrounds a chance. If you have test anxiety, or think that your scores don't reflect your potential for another reason, let me know about it. If you don't have scores and can't afford to take the test, let me know about that too.
3. Good grades in relevant classes (econometrics/statistics, micro, development, behavioral). If you have an outlier grade, feel free to explain it to me in the application.
4. Interest in our work, as evidenced by knowing about it and the related literature.
5. Relevant experience. Having previously done research, especially on randomized experiments, is a plus.

1.2 Internships

I usually don't take interns for short durations; it's not worth the training that is required. For longer durations (at least 2 years), please refer to the section about RA positions above.

1.3 Current Cornell undergraduates

If you're a Cornell undergraduate interested in writing an honors thesis with me, it's enough to send me a short email introducing yourself. My policy is to accept honors thesis students on a "first come, first served" basis, up to eight per year (I'm sorry if all slots are already taken in your year). You therefore don't need to "apply" and send me a CV or transcript (although it will help me determine what you could realistically work on), or come with a fully formed thesis idea. We'll set up an initial meeting, in which we can either refine your thesis idea, or I can make suggestions as to what your thesis could be. After that you can decide if you'd like to work with me or not. Saying No will generate no hard feelings on my part (in fact I prefer this if you're not 100% excited about working together), and I will be happy to advise you on potential alternatives.

1.4 Prospective Cornell PhD students

I advise PhD students in three PhD programs at Cornell: Economics, Applied Economics and Management, and Public Policy. If you're interested in working with me during your PhD, I encourage you to apply to one of these programs. You're welcome to email me to discuss my availability to take on new students. Please include a CV, transcripts, and test scores. I'm sorry that I don't have time for meetings/calls with prospective PhD students.

1.5 Visiting Students

If you're a potential visiting Bachelor's, Master's, or PhD student, please send me a CV, transcripts, SAT/GRE scores (for transcripts and scores, nothing formal is needed; screenshots or informal summaries are fine), and a writing sample (publication, working paper, or essay, in that order of priority). Please also indicate whether you have funding to cover your living expenses, e.g. from a fellowship, your home university, or other sources. Having funding is helpful but not required. Finally, please include information about your intended length of stay, and when you would like to come. The main rule is that the longer you can come, the better. For visiting Bachelor's and Master's students, six months is the minimum. For visiting PhD students, it's flexible, with longer stays dominating shorter ones.

2 While working with me

2.1 The point of everything

The overarching goal of everything we do is to improve the lives of people living in poverty. In the day-to-day life of academia, our dedication to this goal may sometimes be difficult to discern: it may look like we're engaging in idle academic discussions about minutiae, spending a lot of time battling red tape and doing politics, and chasing grants and publications. But we do all of these things because they are the most effective way we have discovered to further our overarching goal of poverty alleviation. It helps to remind yourself of this whenever the demands of everyday work are a source of stress.

2.2 Respecting participants

Because our overarching goal is poverty alleviation, the people who participate in our research are also the people whose lives we want to improve. They are therefore our real employers, and we should always be asking ourselves if our work serves their interests. They are also very generous in giving their time when participating in our surveys; we are therefore very grateful to them and want to treat them with great respect and courtesy: be nice to them and treat them as the smart, interesting, kind, and generous people they are. If a participant wants to speak to a member of the research team with a comment or concern, we want to always give them that opportunity. Serious concerns and any adverse events (e.g. injuries) should be brought to my attention immediately.

2.3 Being health and happy

Your health and happiness are more important than any research project. I expect you to work hard, but whenever work gets in the way of you being healthy and happy, please let me know. If you are aware of specific things that you want to change, I'm eager to discuss with you whether and how we can make those changes; if you don't know what you want to change, I'm eager to brainstorm with you about possibilities. I will also always be supportive of you seeking healthcare, physical or mental.

This also applies to vacations; you're entitled to your vacation time and shouldn't be shy to ask for it. I ask you to let me know at least a month in advance when and for how long you want to take vacations, and to have project needs in mind when making those plans. I'm happy to discuss possibilities for making things work if you want to go away during crunch-time.

Relatedly, family and close relationships are also more important than research. If you need to take time off unexpectedly for reasons related to family matters, please let me know.

2.4 Being honest, trusting, and communicative

The most important principles governing our work together are honesty, trust, and communication. Working together as closely as we do in this lab implies that whether we want to or not, we will get to know each other's quirks very well. On the one hand, this is scary, because it means that the rest of the group will get a pretty good idea of what we are like as a person. At the same time, it's liberating, because the inevitability of this process means that we might as well just be ourselves from the start. This has a number of interesting implications.

First, it means that nobody can make themselves seem more or less smart than they really are. The rest of the group knows it already, for better or worse. This frees us up to put genuine understanding at the center of our interactions: we don't have to pretend to understand when we don't, and we can ask questions freely even if they seem stupid.

To put it somewhat more crudely: After we have worked together, I will know with considerable precision how smart you are; you don't have much control over that. What you can influence is the extent to which I think you're a genuine learner or a show-off.

A second, related implication is that we can own up to our mistakes. All of us get things wrong all the time; coding errors are the most common incarnation, but it ranges from forgetting meetings to missing deadlines. Knowing that it happens to everyone makes it less jarring to admit to it, and easier to do it early.

Again putting it crudely: You will inevitably make mistakes, and I will inevitably find out about them. What you can control is my perception of whether you deal with them constructively: by actively looking for them, owning up to them as soon as possible, and fixing them.

Third, this honesty also makes it easier to trust each other. Our group is fortunate to operate in a high-trust equilibrium: it's safe to assume that everyone else has your best interests at heart. When you ask them for help, they will usually be glad to give it; they expect the same of you. This also includes me: Once you are part of the group, you can trust that I will do what I can to help you complete your work, advance your career, and have good work-life balance. Conversely, I trust that you put a solid effort into completing your work and don't free-ride on the freedoms we give each other. One example of this is work hours: we don't police each other in terms of how many hours we work; the crucial point is whether or not the work gets done. As long as our work is moving at a reasonable pace, I won't care much if you come in late, leave early, or decide to work elsewhere for periods of time (although this should be discussed with me in advance).

2.5 Managing back

It's very difficult for me to see how hard you are working, so I ask you to manage back to me if you are twiddling your thumbs, and if you are working too much. I also rely on you to tell me what you think is going well or wrong with particular projects, or with our working relationship. I don't take such feedback personally and will never blow up on you; if something isn't going well, I will work with you to fix it.

I ask the same of you when I give you feedback about your work.

2.6 Driving projects forward

When we work together on a project, my goal is to give you a lot of ownership and for us to interact as colleagues. It's more interesting and educational for both of us if you don't only execute what I tell you, but instead think actively and critically about what we are doing. This will also make it more likely that you make enough of an intellectual contribution to earn co-authorship. (The latter is not a guarantee, but many of my past RAs have ended up as coauthors on at least one paper.)

An important aspect of this kind of participation is driving projects forward proactively. When you think we are at the stage where input from me is needed to move the project along, please don't wait for me to reach out; instead, set up a meeting proactively, send an agenda ahead of time, and tell me what you think the project needs in general, and what you need from me to make that happen.

2.7 Scheduling time with me

If you're my student, postdoc, or RA, or a Cornell student or postdoc, I will always make time to meet with you. You don't need a particular reason for a meeting — it's ok to just want to chat. Scheduling works as follows:

1. If you're my student, postdoc, or RA, you have read and write access to my calendar and can simply schedule meetings without asking me — just find an open time that suits you and put yourself down. If you don't have access yet, please email me and I will share my calendar with you. You should also share your work calendar with me. If you don't have one and are my PhD student, postdoc, or RA, you should make one.
2. Otherwise, please email me to ask for a meeting. If I don't respond, it almost certainly means that I have forgotten. It never means that I'm not interested or ignoring you on purpose.

2.8 Professional development

Once we have started working together, I consider it part of my job to help you achieve the things you want to achieve, and in particular, get the position of your choice after our time working together. Because it's your life and not mine, I'm not entitled to an opinion as to what that should be, and I will support you in equal measure whatever you decide to do. Most people who work with me go on to do PhDs, but that's neither the only nor the "preferred" path. I encourage you to share your thoughts and plans with me as early and frequently as possible; hopefully this will be useful brainstorming for you, but it will certainly help me write you a stronger letter. More on letters below.

2.9 Reference letters

If you have worked with me for at least 6 months and we have had regular interactions during that time, I consider it part of my job description to write reference letters for you for the remainder of my career. You don't have to apologize when asking for them; you're entitled to them. If we've worked together for less than that period of time, I may still write the letter if I feel that I know you well enough. Sometimes it will happen that we didn't work together particularly well, and I may not be able to write a strong letter. If that's the case, I will tell you in advance, so that you can ask others if you want to. If I don't say anything along these lines, you can assume that I will write you a strong letter.

When you ask for a letter, please send me a CV, transcripts, SAT/GRE scores if you have them (nothing formal is required, just mentioning them is enough), and the statement of purpose or other motivational document if the application required you to write one.

I ask that you give me two weeks to write your letter; if you give me less time I will try to make it but can't guarantee it. Once you've asked me for a letter and I have said that I will do it, you have license and are strongly encouraged to remind me incessantly about getting it done. This is especially true in the days before the deadline. Please don't feel like you're imposing if you remind me; you are doing me a favor.

It helps greatly if you send me a list of the places where you are applying, and where applicable enter me in all the relevant application systems in a single session, so that I have all the request emails in one place.