**J-PAL Jobs and Opportunity Initiative: Overview and Instructions**

*Fall 2021 Round*

*J-PAL’s Jobs and Opportunity Initiative (JOI) funds randomized evaluations of strategies to improve employment outcomes. JOI is now calling for proposals from J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL postdocs, and JOI invited researchers for full research projects, pilot studies, travel/proposal development grants, and policy outreach support grants. PhD students, with support from an advisor who is a J-PAL affiliate or JOI-invited researcher, are also eligible to apply. Resident African scholars are eligible to apply for pilot studies and travel/proposal development grants.* ***Letters of interest are due by Tuesday, September 7 at 5:00 PM ET. Proposals are due by Tuesday, October 12 at 5:00 PM ET.***

**Background**

The International Labour Organization estimates 220 million people were unemployed globally as of 2020[[1]](#footnote-1). High unemployment and low labor force participation are particularly acute in certain geographies, and often among subsets of the population such as youth and women. While men’s labor force participation was 72.1 percent in 2020, women’s labor force participation was just 45.2 percent[[2]](#footnote-2). Globally the youth labor force participation rate was 37.8 percent in 2020[[3]](#footnote-3).

Beyond the challenge of getting work, employment does not guarantee that people have decent livelihoods to maintain themselves and their families. Globally 22 percent of workers lived in either extreme or moderate poverty in 2020[[4]](#footnote-4). Many workers remain trapped in low-quality jobs with low pay, unsafe conditions, or poor social protections.

Existing literature suggests several key causes for these employment challenges, including job search and matching frictions and economies that do not create enough quality jobs. Despite the wide array of programs that innovators have designed in response to this global challenge, many questions remain unanswered to guide policymakers toward the most effective solutions.

**Research Gaps in Jobs and Opportunity**

JOI approaches the problem of poor employment outcomes from the supply side, matching jobseekers to employment, and the demand side (job creation), with the future of jobs as a crosscutting theme.

**Supply and matching:**

*Skills training:* Job seekers often lack the skills required to perform jobs, so training should in theory help them to become better candidates. Training programs are a common feature of government and NGO programming, especially for youth. But these programs tend to be very expensive[[5]](#footnote-5), and some have had disappointing results when rigorously evaluated. One challenge to making conclusive statements about the success of training programs is that programs vary greatly in terms of how they are implemented and who they target. In addition, evaluations largely test interventions as a whole, not individual components. Understanding which components of a training program are most effective could be particularly insightful to help design more cost-effective programs.

Implementation features that would be helpful to test further within training programs include: (i) matching trainees to programs that are the best fit for them (for example, by helping young people navigate educational tracks that lead to better labor market options), (ii) addressing participants costs of attending to reduce dropout rates, (iii) recruiting/screening for high-quality trainers, (iv) aligning payment incentives for training providers, (v) involving the private sector in curriculum development and for on-the-job training opportunities, (vi) emphasizing soft skills training, and (vii) communicating the quality of training (See evidence from [Colombia](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/vocational-training-disadvantaged-youth-colombia), [Uganda](http://www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~uctpimr/research/Training.pdf), [Dominican Republic](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0019793918768260)*,* [Argentina](http://ftp.iza.org/dp9784.pdf), and [Ghana](http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/835751557408824890/The-Apprenticeship-to-Work-Transition-Experimental-Evidence-from-Ghana)).

*Job search:* While jobseekers face many barriers to transition into the workforce, some of the most commonly cited issues are that (i) they do not know where or how to search for jobs, (ii) they underestimate the benefits of job search and therefore end up underinvesting in it, and (iii) they struggle to communicate their qualifications to employers.

Especially in developing country contexts where information about job opportunities can be costly to acquire, reducing barriers to this information can have large effects on job outcomes. For example, programs could include [providing transportation subsidies to jobseekers so they can commute to the city center to look for work](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/e9b89f_9248112b23ea4ceba8a9d1458dd4ba66.pdf), [providing vouchers to help people attend job fairs](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0304387815001303?via%3Dihub), or [providing information in rural areas about jobs available in the city](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/impact-improved-labor-market-opportunities-marriage-and-fertility-decisions-india).

Motivating jobseekers to invest more in their search and helping them stretch themselves to look in places they might not have considered can improve their employment outcomes. Some examples of programs that touch on this topic [motivate jobseekers to make a detailed job search plan](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/job-search-planning-employment-south-africa), or [provide them with an online platform that orients them to sectors or types of jobs that they might not have considered before](https://academic.oup.com/restud/article/86/4/1411/5115940?guestAccessKey=5d4057ab-7ddf-4852-9c9f-d9cc6c9adbba).

Helping jobseekers better recognize their skills and communicate them to potential employers can improve their job outcomes and can help firms hire more qualified candidates. Examples of programs in this area include [CV and interview workshops](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/e9b89f_9248112b23ea4ceba8a9d1458dd4ba66.pdf), [encouraging jobseekers to include reference letters in their job applications](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/role-reference-letters-and-skill-accreditation-south-african-labour-market), or [providing jobseekers with certificates that rate their soft skills](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3268523).

Despite promising results from job search support programs, [these programs have been less effective when there were other important barriers in the labor market](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/policy-insight/reducing-search-barriers-jobseekers). These barriers could include a lack of job openings, high relocation costs, or mismatched expectations between jobseekers and employers.

[In the few cases where it was measured, some of the gains from job search assistance programs came at the expense of jobseekers who did not receive the programs](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/policy-insight/reducing-search-barriers-jobseekers), implying that job search assistance may have merely reshuffled who got the limited number of available jobs. While many studies showed positive impacts on outcomes such as interview offers, job offers, employment, and quality employment, not all of the studies measured or showed sustained benefits to earnings, total employment, or well-being.

It would be beneficial for future research to explore which programs lead to increases in earnings, total employment, or well-being. It would also be beneficial for future research to rigorously measure displacement effects of job search programs, and explore ways to mitigate displacement effects.

*Discrimination in hiring:* [There is strong evidence of hiring discrimination against minority and underrepresented groups in many countries](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/policy-insight/changing-resumes-reduce-hiring-discrimination). However, most correspondence studies of discrimination come from high-income countries, and it would be helpful to better understand the extent of hiring discrimination in low- and middle-income countries.

Recent studies have used randomization to explore ways to combat hiring discrimination. In these limited studies to date, removing identifying information on job applications had perverse effects on minorities if [the impacted firms were the ones already treating minority applicants favorably](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/discrimination-hiring-and-anonymous-cvs-france-cv-anonymes), or [if firms discriminated on other characteristics after some information was removed](https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/133/1/191/4060073). Strategies to test in the future include: (i) socio-cognitive de-biasing, (ii) technological de-biasing, (iii) increasing the prevalence of minority leaders as role models, (iv) intergroup contact, and (vi) legal solutions.

**Labor market regulations and job creation:**

Beyond cash grants (discussed more below), there are other exciting innovations that have had some impact on firm growth. For example, solutions could include [increasing small business’s market access by increasing their access to export markets](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publications/egyptian-rug-firms-weave-their-way-into-foreign-markets.pdf) or [addressing regulatory barriers to firm growth by helping firms to better understand the labor regulations in their country](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publications/TeachingLaborLaws_Bertrand-Crepon_January2019.pdf). There is limited research to date on how to help firms grow and hire more workers, and more research in this space would be a valuable contribution.

**Supporting small and microentrepreneurs through alternative business training models:**

Small and microentrepreneurs face an ever-evolving set of challenges, yet traditional business training programs tend to teach a broad set of skills that small-scale firm owners may not find or perceive to be useful and applicable to their business. While trainings that teach basic concepts like record-keeping and costing in classroom settings are easier to deliver to large numbers of entrepreneurs, this format may limit how adaptive the content is to specific needs of individual businesses and the performance of these training programs has been mixed.

In addition, specific groups of entrepreneurs—such as women and youth—face further constraints that can limit the effectiveness of traditional training. Despite the fact that women run the [majority of microenterprises](https://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~sjv340/microentrepreneurs.pdf) in low-and middle-income countries, there is a significant gender gap in business performance. Women face unique and numerous challenges running successful businesses, from lack of mobility and autonomy, safety concerns, and often-low levels of education. There is limited evidence on how the impacts of alternative business training models vary for women, and the studies that do examine gender-disaggregated impact find mixed results.

How can we go beyond the traditional business training model to better support small and microentrepreneurs? A growing body of evidence suggests that [alternative training programs](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/policy-insight/teaching-business-skills-support-microentrepreneurs) that are delivered one-on-one, tailored to participants’ needs, teach easy-to-apply skills, or go beyond traditional curricula to foster entrepreneurial mindsets may be more effective. Several alternatives to the traditional business training model show promise for improving small firm outcomes:

1. *Personal initiative training:* These trainings aim for attitudinal change, particularly the fostering of entrepreneurial mindsets and aspirations. A [growing body of research](https://voxdev.org/sites/default/files/Training_Entrepreneurs_Issue_1.pdf) is finding promising results for psychological training: In [Togo](https://science.sciencemag.org/content/357/6357/1287) and [Jamaica](https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/12325/the-impact-of-soft-skills-training-for-entrepreneurs-in-jamaica), for example, microentrepreneurs invited to entrepreneurial mindset trainings improved their profits after participating. In addition to raising profits, in Togo entrepreneurs who were offered the training also employed more people and invested more in their business. Variation in the longevity of impact on profits, however, raises questions about how best such psychological trainings should be implemented and whether they should be combined with other forms of training. While evidence on the effectiveness of these programs for women participants is [also mixed](https://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~sjv340/microentrepreneurs.pdf), this line of research into psychological training may shed light on the relationship between entrepreneurial mindsets and the gender profit gap.
2. *Rule-of-thumb training:* Heuristics or rule-of-thumb training aims to simplify standard business training into a set of routines that can be more easily understood. Rather than trying to teach accounting, for example, such training focuses on basic financial principles like keeping household and business money in two separate drawers. Such an approach holds appeal for training the smallest businesses and least-educated business owners. In the [Dominican Republic](https://www.poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/publications/KIS-DFS-March2013.pdf), researchers found that a rule-of-thumb finances training, in which nearly all participants were women, was indeed more effective at driving business best practices use among lower-educated microentrepreneurs than a standard accounting training. Similarly, in [Ecuador](https://sistemas.colmex.mx/Reportes/LACEALAMES/LACEA-LAMES2019_paper_175.pdf), a rule-of-thumb finances training increased daily profits and sales, particularly among women microentrepreneurs and and people experiencing more cognitive load (i.e., more stress like children, house duties, etc. to keep in mind). While evidence on the long-lasting effects of heuristics training is limited, this simplified training model shows promise for supporting more vulnerable microentrepreneurs.
3. *Peer Interactions and Mentorship:* Firms may also be able to improve their business and management practices through learning from each other. Matching firms with peers and mentors to share better business and management practices that are also locally relevant seems to offer [promising results](https://voxdev.org/sites/default/files/Training_Entrepreneurs_Issue_1.pdf) when firms get matched with similar, but slightly better peers who are not close competitors. In [China](https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/133/3/1229/4768295), for example, researchers randomly assigned firm owners into groups of 10, which met for monthly chats for 10 months. Participant firms improved their management practices, and those that were randomized into groups with higher-quality peers showed larger increases in sales, profits, and management practices than those with weaker peers. The value of high-quality peers is further demonstrated by a study from [India](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/smj.2987), in which high-growth tech startups were randomized into pairs for peer advice. Firms advised by more formally managed firms grew 28 percent larger and were 10 percentage points less likely to fail two years after the intervention than those advised by peers with an informal approach.

In addition to increasing learning, interactions with peers can have positive psychological effects that may lead to improved business outcomes. In [India](https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20140215), researchers offered a two-day business training program to female microentrepreneurs and invited half of the participants to bring a friend with them. They found that, in addition to reporting significantly increased business activity, women who brought a friend set higher goals for their business and formed stronger networks with other female entrepreneurs. In contexts where women experience social restrictions, programs that increase interactions with other business owners and seek to raise aspirations may contribute to [closing the gender profit gap](https://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~sjv340/microentrepreneurs.pdf).

Mentorship may be another pathway through which firm owners can learn from each other, but evidence to date on traditional mentorship programs for female mentees finds [limited impact](https://voxdev.org/sites/default/files/Training_Entrepreneurs_Issue_1.pdf) on business outcomes.

1. *Alternative training for youth:* There is some evidence from vocational training (e.g. [Dominican Republic](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/research-paper/454_Living_up_to_expectations_Gerler-et-al._March2018.pdf)) and adolescent empowerment (e.g. [Zambia](https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&=&context=psc_publications&=&sei-redir=1&referer=https%253A%252F%252Fwww.google.com%252Furl%253Fq%253Dhttps%253A%252F%252Frepository.upenn.edu%252Fcgi%252Fviewcontent.cgi%253Farticle%25253D1016%252526context%25253Dpsc_publications%2526sa%253DD%2526source%253Deditors%2526ust%253D1614805194307000%2526usg%253DAOvVaw395BgB6ADY6uM5j-JnL6R-#search=%22https%3A%2F%2Frepository.upenn.edu%2Fcgi%2Fviewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D1016%26context%3Dpsc_publications%22)) literature that points to the positive impacts that teaching soft skills can have on youth specifically. However, evidence is lacking on the impact of soft skills training in the context of business training for youth. Initial studies such as one comparing hard skills to soft skills for entrepreneurial success in [Uganda](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/soft-versus-hard-skills-entrepreneurial-success-evidence-youth-entrepreneurship-training) are ongoing, but more research would be valuable to understand how alternative forms of business training can support youth.

**Identifying and supporting high-growth-potential entrepreneurs:**

Observational studies have shown that in some contexts, high-growth-potential enterprises (often known as “gazelle firms”) are a key driver of employment growth. In [Ghana](https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/24221/Identifying0ga0pid0growth0potential.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y), for example, researchers found that 15 of the largest 50 leading domestic firms began as small-scale startups. And in [Sri Lanka](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304387813001326), researchers show that 12 percent of firms with more than five employees had no employees during their first year of operation, illustrating the potential value of high-growth firms to job creation. But how do we best identify these high-potential entrepreneurs among the general entrepreneurial population and make sure that they have the support they need to start or grow their business to its full potential?

1. *Identifying high-growth-potential entrepreneurs:* Two studies using expert analysis by a panel of judges to predict high-growth entrepreneurs show mixed results, suggesting that identification is indeed challenging. An alternative to expert judgement is to use machine learning to build prediction models; however, there is [little evidence](https://ideas.repec.org/p/wbk/wbrwps/8271.html) to date suggesting that such models can outperform human experts.

One potentially promising approach is to leverage non-traditional sources of information to identify high-impact entrepreneurs. In [India](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/58a70345e5274a2a5f000020/Rigol_Targeting_High_Ability_Entrepreneurs_Using_Community_Information.pdf), for instance, researchers leveraged community members’ knowledge about one another as a cost-effective way of reducing uncertainty about the potential of entrepreneurs. Using a ranking system, they found that communities were able to successfully identify the best entrepreneurs, with those selected going on to earn three times higher monthly profits compared to the average entrepreneur. By providing targeted support to these high-potential individuals, such as in the form of business training and additional financing, this could help entrepreneurs overcome their constraints and allow them to grow rapidly beyond a small scale.

1. *Supporting high-growth-potential entrepreneurs:* Entrepreneurs starting high-growth-potential firms are often highly educated and highly motivated and may be less likely to need basic business skills or entrepreneurial mindset training. Instead, they [may benefit more](https://voxdev.org/sites/default/files/Training_Entrepreneurs_Issue_1.pdf) from more specialized assistance.

Grants and training targeted at high-potential entrepreneurs through business plan competitions and business accelerators have shown promising results on business outcomes and employment. Across one randomized evaluation in [Nigeria](https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20151404) and two quasi-experimental studies in [Central America](https://www.wiwi.uni-frankfurt.de/fileadmin/user_upload/dateien_ei/papers_pdfs/Schuendeln/WD_-_Teaching_Entrepreneurs.pdf) and [East Africa](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220388.2016.1251584?scroll=top&needAccess=true#aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGFuZGZvbmxpbmUuY29tL2RvaS9wZGYvMTAuMTA4MC8wMDIyMDM4OC4yMDE2LjEyNTE1ODQ/bmVlZEFjY2Vzcz10cnVlQEBAMA==), business competitions winners offered targeted support in the form of grants and business plan training were found to be more likely to start or expand a business, more likely to create new jobs, and in some cases had large impacts on profits and sales. The World Bank is [now supporting](https://voxdev.org/topic/firms-trade/do-business-plan-competitions-work) similar programs in Kenya and Senegal. In the [Western Balkans](https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/453261533567046459/can-government-intervention-make-firms-more-investment-ready-a-randomized-experiment-in-the-western-balkans), another randomized evaluation finds that small tech start-ups who received investment-readiness coaching were more likely to get external financing than those that did not, and this was particularly true of smaller firms who were otherwise less likely to receive outside investments.

However, the positive impacts of such programs may often be limited to the highest-potential entrepreneurs, emphasizing the importance of the selection process. In [Chile](https://academic.oup.com/rfs/article/31/4/1566/4104437?login=true), one quasi-experimental study assesses the impact of participation in an accelerator program that provides cash grants and office space, finding that only the highest-quality ventures selected to participate saw improved firm outcomes by the end. In another quasi-experimental study, researchers evaluated a [Colombian business accelerator](https://juanitagonzalez-uribe.net/portfolio_page/identifying-and-impacting-gazelles-evidence-from-a-business-accelerator-joint-with-santiago-reyes/) that provides exclusively non-monetary (such as training, advice, and visibility) support to participants. While they found that providing non-monetary services significantly increased average revenue, the impact was entirely driven by firms identified as having the highest growth potential at the application stage. Together, these studies illustrate the importance of correctly identifying high-growth-potential entrepreneurs, and the promise of grants combined with—or possibly separate from—more sophisticated business training.

Evidence is still limited on the effectiveness of business plan competitions and accelerators for women. Women entrepreneurs make up less than one-fifth of the study samples in the [Nigeria](https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20151404) and [Western Balkans](https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/453261533567046459/can-government-intervention-make-firms-more-investment-ready-a-randomized-experiment-in-the-western-balkans) evaluations, making it difficult to detect impact. Further research would benefit from incorporating a gender focus to identify additional barriers that female entrepreneurs face to participating in and benefiting from these programs.

Interventions that move beyond the boundary of the entrepreneur and link firms to marketplaces may fill crucial gaps not met by training or grants. As small firms grow larger, it becomes increasingly difficult for an entrepreneur to successfully manage all aspects of the business, regardless of their training. Connecting business owners with experts to whom they can delegate specialized tasks such as marketing and finance can thus be important to helping firms grow. This is examined in [Nigeria](http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/377351608212969114/pdf/Improving-Business-Practices-and-the-Boundary-of-the-Entrepreneur-A-Randomized-Experiment-Comparing-Training-Consulting-Insourcing-and-Outsourcing.pdf), where researchers find that assisting entrepreneurs in hiring a subsidized specialist through an online marketplace for business services led to improved marketing practices, more innovation, and higher profits over two years. One-third of firms chose to retain their specialists even after the subsidy ended, indicating that they found the services highly useful.

Finally, promising evidence is emerging around interventions that aim to alleviate demand constraints through connecting firms to large or international buyers. In [Liberia](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w27662/w27662.pdf), for example, firms that participated in a week-long training for how to market to procurement buyers won three times as many contracts and appear to have higher revenue, although this effect was limited to firms with internet access. And in [Egypt](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/media/file-research-paper/exporting-and-firm-performance-evidence-randomized-trial), offering small rug producers the opportunity to export to higher-income markets led to increased profits as firms improved their production techniques and efficiency. The results of these two studies suggest that interventions that target barriers to market participation are a promising path for supporting high-growth-potential entrepreneurs.

**Future of jobs:**

There is currently much concern and discussion around how automation and globalization might transform labor markets and threaten livelihoods. While there is [a growing body of rigorous research addressing the future of jobs](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/documents/work-of-the-future-literature-review-4.2.19.pdf), few of these studies come from low- and middle-income countries. Examples include [training low-skilled marginalized youth to access Internet-based employment](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/impact-tech-centered-vocational-training-and-employment-program-youth-kenya) or [using online platforms to support job search efforts](https://academic.oup.com/restud/article/86/4/1411/5115940?guestAccessKey=5d4057ab-7ddf-4852-9c9f-d9cc6c9adbba).

Future research around the role of the gig economy in low- and middle-income countries, technology-based employment solutions, and equipping people to succeed in light of changing labor market demands would be valuable contributions to the existing literature.

It would also be helpful to better understand the multitude of barriers that women face to employment and how to best alleviate those barriers.

**Summary of Priority Research Questions**

JOI funds randomized evaluations of programs and policies aimed at improving employment conditions, building a better bridge between field experiments and underlying economic theories. While this list is not exhaustive, key open questions this initiative seeks to address include:

**Supply and matching**

1. Under what conditions do skills training programs improve employment outcomes? What is the optimal role of the private sector in skills training programs?
2. Which design features of skills training programs have the most impact?
3. What are the most effective ways to reduce the barriers (information, financial, or otherwise) that people face to access training programs?
4. What type of skills (soft skills vs technical skills) are most effective at improving employment outcomes?
5. Which programs best encourage increased and broader job search efforts among jobseekers? Does this increase net employment?
6. How can policymakers leverage both online platforms and low technology strategies to reduce search barriers for jobseekers and reduce hiring costs for firms?
7. What are the most effective ways to align people’s expectations with the realities of the labor market? How can technology platforms serve this purpose?
8. Does increasing job seeker mobility improve employment outcomes? How can policies best increase job seekers’ mobility, both domestically and internationally?
9. Which policies are most effective at reducing hiring discrimination?

**Labor market regulations and job creation**

1. How do labor market regulations impact job creation?

**[New fall 2021] Supporting small and microentrepreneurs through alternative business training models (projects should demonstrate an eye toward scale)**

1. For what types of entrepreneurs are personal initiative or rule-of-thumb training most effective for and what level of training intensity is optimal?
2. What are the key constraints that women and youth face to running successful businesses, and what forms of alternative business training are best suited to helping participants overcome them?
3. To what extent does long-term follow-up matter in training implementation for ensuring persistent impact?
4. How does combining personal initiative training with other training interventions impact the effectiveness of either? When is combining appropriate, and when is it not?
5. How effective is rule-of-thumb training at instilling skills outside of business finances?
6. Who is best suited to teach alternative business training courses?
7. How do we improve the cost-effectiveness of training?
8. Given that peer matching seems to be most effective when firms of mixed quality are paired, how can peer matching interventions be designed to benefit high-quality firms in addition to lower-quality firms?

**[New fall 2021] Identifying and supporting high-growth-potential entrepreneurs (projects should demonstrate an eye toward scale)**

1. What are the important determinants of success of a high-growth-potential entrepreneur, and is human judgement best for making these predictions?
2. What are effective targeting mechanisms to identify high-potential entrepreneurs?
3. How can female participation in business plan competitions and accelerators be increased?
4. Given the difficulty of identifying high-potential entrepreneurs and the packaged nature of most accelerator and incubator programs, what is the best way to experimentally evaluate interventions?
5. When are cash grants, non-monetary services, or a combination more appropriate for high-growth-potential entrepreneurs?
6. What is the role of demand constraints in limiting the growth of high-potential entrepreneurs, and how can we alleviate those constraints?
7. What is the role of constraints due to a lack of technical skills such as finance and marketing, and are these constraints better alleviated through training, insourcing, or outsourcing?
8. What non-monetary services have the highest impact on high-potential firm growth? Which are most cost-effective and scalable?
9. What is the optimal firm size or type to target for driving job creation?
10. Under what circumstances does firm growth lead to job creation?

**Future of jobs**

1. How can economies best prepare their workers for the changing demands of the labor market? How can economies harness technology advances to improve job opportunities for both high-skill and lower-skill workers? For example, how can programs best connect marginalized youth to internet-based employment?
2. How do unstable or irregular work arrangements and “gigs” influence productivity, inclusiveness, and career prospects of youth, women, or other subsets of the population?
3. How can economies build in protections and benefits for workers who do not have access to traditional social protections?
4. How can technology contribute to job creation and firm growth, improve matching, reduce search frictions, and influence job quality?
5. Which policies are most effective to promote female labor force participation?
6. Which policies most effectively connect job seekers with sectors in their economy, such as agriculture, manufacturing, or textiles?

The initiative will prioritize evaluations that measure cost-effectiveness, scalability, diversity and inclusion, and displacement.

If a researcher is uncertain about whether a research project is eligible for JOI, please email JOI@povertyactionlab.org.

**Geographic focus**

Projects related to (1) supply and matching, (2) labor market regulations and job creation, and (3) future of jobs will be strongly prioritized if they are in sub-Saharan Africa (due to donor preferences), especially in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. JOI will also consider funding projects in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and especially in the Middle East and North Africa, but funding for projects in these geographies is extremely limited. The Jobs and Opportunity Initiative is unable to fund work in Europe, Canada, or the United States.

Projects related to (1) supporting small and microentrepreneurs through alternative business training models, and (2) identifying and supporting high-growth-potential entrepreneurs across Africa, Asia, LAC, and MENA will receive equal consideration, with no regional priority.

**Funds**

Three types of proposals will be considered in this round:

*Full Research Projects*: These grants are for research projects at a mature level of development. Not only must the research question be clear, but applicants must also demonstrate a commitment from implementing partners, a method of randomization, well-defined instruments, and sample size estimates. Proposals can also be submitted for funding the continuation of research projects that have already started without JOI funding (including those for which field data collection has been completed). The expectation is that these projects will result in a publicly available paper that is eventually submitted to a top economics journal. The total amount awarded to a single project, including any JOI funding for proposal development or piloting, will not exceed $400,000.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*Pilot Studies*: These grants are for studies with a clear research question, but for which the design and implementation requires further testing and pilot data.[[7]](#footnote-7) The expectation is that these projects will ultimately develop into full-scale randomized evaluations. The maximum amount awarded for pilot studies is $75,000.

*Travel/Proposal Development Grants:* These grants cover exploratory work related to preliminary research ideas, such as conducting background research, developing partnerships, visiting field sites, and collecting preliminary data. The expectation is that these funds will be used to support costs related to PI travel to develop a proposal for a pilot or full scale randomized evaluation during a subsequent call for proposals. The maximum amount awarded for travel/proposal development grants is $10,000.

Please note, initiative pilot and travel grants may be used for activities intended to facilitate access to administrative data for designing or conducting an RCT. Examples of these activities include, but are not limited to, negotiating data use agreements, conducting exploratory data analysis and cleaning, or setting up technical access mechanisms.

Please note that JOI was established to fund randomized impact evaluations of programs and policies being implemented in the field. As a general rule, JOI does not fund pure lab experiments. A proposal may be considered if there is a randomized field evaluation of an underlying program or policy which supplements a lab experiment.

**Off-Cycle Proposals**

JOI offers two types of funding outside of the regular RFP cycles. Eligibility for these proposals is the same as for the regular funding cycles:

*Off-Cycle Projects*: These grants are intended for research projects that face a significant time constraint and need to receive funding before the end of a regular funding round to make use of an unanticipated opportunity (e.g. a newly announced policy change that will go into effect soon, creating an opportunity for an evaluation). Proposals must clearly justify the need to receive a decision on an expedited schedule. The maximum amount awarded to an off-cycle proposal is $75,000.

*Policy Outreach Support*: These funds are intended to support conferences, workshops, events, or other policy outreach activities to disseminate evidence from JOI-funded evaluations, or other randomized evaluations conducted by J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL postdocs, or JOI invited researchers that address JOI’s research priorities. These funds can be used to cover travel, accommodations, meals, venues, and related costs. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis and the suggested budget range for these requests is $10,000 – $20,000.

**Eligibility**

J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL postdocs, and JOI invited researchers are eligible to apply for any type of JOI funding. Please note that JOI invited researchers are nominated and reviewed on a quarterly basis, with the review based on a nominee’s previous research with a particular emphasis on randomized evaluations related to labor markets. All proposals may include collaborators outside of this network.

J-PAL regional offices are eligible to apply for *policy outreach projects* without an affiliated professor as a collaborator.

In addition, PhD students may be eligible to apply for travel/proposal development grants or up to $50,000 in pilot or full-scale funding. To be eligible, PhD students must have a J-PAL affiliate or JOI invited researcher on their thesis committee. This adviser must provide a letter of support and indicate willingness to remain involved in a supervisory role throughout the lifetime of the project.[[8]](#footnote-8) If the student is pre-thesis, the letter should state “I am actively responsible for supervising this project/research and anticipate being on the student’s thesis committee.” In addition, in order to apply for up to $50,000 for pilot or full-scale funding, graduate students must provide documented evidence of successful pilot activities, funded either through a JOI travel/proposal development grant or other sources. Please note that PhD students are not eligible to apply for off-cycle funding.

Additionally, resident African scholars–those who have completed a PhD in economics or a related field and are based in an academic institution in sub-Saharan Africa–are eligible to apply for travel/proposal development grants (up to $10,000) and pilot grants (up to $75,000). Full RCT funding eligibility is extended to African scholars who have successfully completed a pilot funded by J-PAL (up to $400,000). Targeted mentorship will be provided to African scholars who receive funds from the initiative. To learn more about this opportunity, visit our [JOI African Scholars webpage](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/initiative/jobs-and-opportunity-initiative-joi-african-scholars-opportunities).

Please note that any J-PAL affiliate, J-PAL postdoc, JOI invited researcher, African scholar, or eligible PhD student can submit **a maximum of three pilot or full-scale proposals within a 12-month period to JOI**, either as a main PI or co-PI in the proposal. For example, if a researcher submitted two pilot or full-scale proposals in our Spring 2020 round, they can then only submit a maximum of 1 pilot or full-scale proposal in our Fall 2020 round.

**Applications**

***Researchers should submit a letter of interest by Tuesday, September 7 at 5:00 PM ET. Proposal applications are due by Tuesday, October 12 at 5:00 PM ET.*** Please submit your application via J-PAL’s [online portal](http://jpal.force.com/portal).

To facilitate your proposal development, we have hosted reference application documents on [JOI’s website](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/initiative/jobs-and-opportunity-initiative-rfp) that outline in detail all required information that applicants will be asked to provide when submitting a proposal to JOI. You are welcome to begin drafting your proposal materials using these templates, as the fields and content included in these reference documents will be required in the online portal system. Please do not complete or submit these reference documents to JOI for consideration.

**Review Process**

Proposals are reviewed along five broad criteria: academic contribution, policy relevance, technical design, project viability, and value of research.

*Full and Pilot Proposals:* Proposals are distributed for review and scoring by the members of the Review Board, consisting of the JOI co-chairs and other J-PAL affiliates chosen by the J-PAL Executive Committee.

All board members submitting a proposal in the current round of funding are required to recuse themselves from this review[[9]](#footnote-9).Based on the scores and the comments of the referees, the review board votes on the status of the application. The status of an application can fall into four categories: (1) approved, (2) conditional approval (with minor revisions or clarifications), (3) revise and resubmit during this or a subsequent round, and (4) not approved.

*Travel/Proposal Development Proposals:* The JOI co-chairs review the proposals and make final funding decisions.

*Off-Cycle Proposals:* The JOI co-chairs review the proposals and can decide to award funding, reject the proposal for funding, or include the proposal in the regular review process for the next RFP round.

*Policy Outreach Support Proposals*: Proposals are reviewed by the JOI co-chairs on a rolling basis, with decisions generally made within 2-4 weeks. The JOI co-chairs may decide to award funding, request a revise and resubmit, or reject the proposal for funding.

**Timeline**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Wednesday, August 4 | RFP is issued |
| Tuesday, September 7 | Letters of interest deadline |
| Tuesday, October 12 | Proposal submission deadline |
| Week of December 13 | Results announced |

**Grant Conditions**

*Full and Pilot Grants*: If your proposal is selected for funding, the terms of the award will be as follows:

1. **Peer-review proposals:** Grantees may be requested to peer-review proposals in future JOI rounds.
2. **Project registration:** Within three months of the start date indicated on the proposal, grantees must register their trial with the [AEA RCT Registry](http://www.socialscienceregistry.org). Registration includes 18 required fields, such as your name and a small subset of your IRB requirements. There is also the opportunity to include more information, including power calculations and an optional pre-analysis plan. *(Full studies only)*
3. **Annual progress reporting:** Grantees will be requested to provide a brief start-up report, semi-annual financial updates; annual progress reports; a final financial report within 60 days of completion of the award period; and a final project report with preliminary results within four months of completion of the award period (for pilots, the final project report is due within two months of the completion of the award period).
4. **Collecting and reporting program cost data:** Policymakers are interested in program costs, as it is one of the key factors in their decision to support a program. Cost data also allows for [cost effectiveness analysis (CEA)](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/node/21919/), which J-PAL may conduct (with permission from the researchers), even if such analysis is not part of an academic paper. In order to facilitate cost collection, JOI awards include $1,000 to defray expenses associated with collecting cost data. JOI will provide a costing worksheet for grantees to update annually. If grantees are unable to collect detailed cost data, grantees are still required to provide estimates of total program cost, average cost per beneficiary, and marginal cost to add another beneficiary. *(Full studies only)*
5. **Collecting and reporting Gender-disaggregated data:** J-PAL, through its Gender sector, is making an effort to study heterogeneity in program impacts by beneficiary/participant gender more systematically. Please note that the following request only applies to J-PAL internal reports and does not extend to the academic paper or online J-PAL summary.

Many studies funded by J-PAL initiatives already collect study participants’ gender. In such cases, and when outcome data are individual-specific, we request that grantees conduct heterogeneity analyses by beneficiary gender for the study’s main results for internal reporting to J-PAL (to be shared in the final grant report). A single study might be underpowered to detect heterogeneous treatment effects, or null results might not seem interesting in one study, but these findings may be meaningful when included in an analysis across studies. J-PAL will use the reported results for (a) determining potential pooled statistical analyses to conduct across studies and (b) generating gender-related policy lessons in Labor Markets. Our reporting template will include a question on this, which researchers are encouraged to fill in when applicable. We recognize that there will be cases where this reporting is not applicable for various reasons. In these cases, the PIs can just provide a brief explanation to be shared with the Gender sector.
6. **Data publication:** Grantees may be requested to share data collection instruments and methodologies with other grantees. Furthermore, researchers funded through this grant will be required to publish de-identified data in accordance with J-PAL’s [Data and Code Availability Policy](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B97AuBEZpZ9zZE5ncHEzTWZnNjg/view). J-PAL's research team can work with you to clean, label, de-identify, document and replicate datasets collected as part of a randomized trial before publishing them in the [J-PAL Dataverse](https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jpal) or another data repository of your choice. Requests for data publication services can be made by sending an email to data@povertyactionlab.org. (*Full studies only)*
7. **Participate in JOI activities:** Grantees may be requested to participate in one of the JOI’s activities at a mutually agreed time and place. Activities may include evidence workshops, matchmaking conference, or presentations to one of the JOI’s donors.
8. **Credit JOI**: Any presentations and publications, including academic papers, policy briefs, press releases, blogs, and organizational newsletters that emerge from this project should credit the J-PAL Jobs and Opportunity Initiative with the following text and link: “This research is funded by the [J-PAL Jobs and Opportunity Initiative](http://povertyactionlab.org/initiative/jobs-and-opportunity-initiative).”
9. Since J-PAL is part of MIT, everyone who is associated with J-PAL, including researchers worldwide receiving grants from J-PAL initiatives, are considered part of the broader MIT community. Therefore, it is our hope and expectation that they will adhere to MIT’s community-wide policies that are available [here](https://policies.mit.edu/policies-procedures/90-relations-and-responsibilities-within-mit-community). Please review the Code of Conduct document as it relates to J-PAL and affiliates [here](https://drive.google.com/a/povertyactionlab.org/file/d/1vIkAqn4N8UyfHGL1iHzIM977y1kbSqP2/view?usp=sharing).

*Travel/Proposal Development Grants:* Recipients will be required to submit a brief progress report after completing travel and may be asked to participate in one of JOI’s activities on a mutually agreed date and place.

*Policy Outreach Support Grants*: Recipients will be expected to report on the use of these funds in regular JOI project reports. In the case that the policy outreach activities are not linked to a specific JOI-funded project, recipients will be asked to submit project and expense reports within 30 days of completion of the work plan specified in the proposal. All outreach activities must be completed within six months of receiving the award.

**Administrative Notes**

Full and pilot grants are provided under an award from MIT to the Institute to Receive Award. Travel/proposal development grants and policy outreach support grants are paid as travel reimbursements. For more information on budget, requirements, and process, please see instructions in the respective application form and instructions documents. These and all other materials needed to apply for full research, pilot, travel/proposal development, or policy outreach support grants are available on the [JOI webpage](http://povertyactionlab.org/initiative/jobs-and-opportunity-initiative).

Additionally, MIT requires that there is a subawardee PI at the Institute to Receive Award (ITRA) who will be responsible for overseeing the work on the ground. This may be one of the academic co-PI’s or it may be a non-academic PI, such as the Executive Director or Director of Research of the ITRA. This person must be formally affiliated with the ITRA. Affiliation could be as a professor, associate professor, staff, fellow, or some other type of relationship that is recognized by the university or organization. A J-PAL Affiliation or J-PAL Invited Researcher status does not constitute an official affiliation with J-PAL regional office host universities.

**Related Initiatives**

Please do not submit the same proposal to more than one J-PAL or IPA initiative at the same time. Before applying to JOI, consider whether your proposal may be better suited for the J-PAL/CEGA Agricultural Technology Adoption Initiative (ATAI) or the J-PAL Gender and Economic Agency Initiative (GEA). Please see more information on the other initiatives below. If you are uncertain about which initiative to apply to, please contact JOI@povertyactionlab.org.

[J-PAL/CEGA Agricultural Technology Adoption Initiative (ATAI):](https://www.atai-research.org/) The ATAI initiative aims to generate a body of rigorous evidence that illuminate the mechanisms underlying “agricultural transformation” for rural poverty alleviation in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. This includes evaluations of the ways that low-income populations are, or could be, gainfully employed as part of agricultural value chains beyond working as small-scale producers. This could include intermediaries engaged in trading, transport, aggregation, quality certification, agro-processing, etc. It also includes strategies to engage youth, women, and other vulnerable or marginalized groups (e.g. landless laborers) in more lucrative and/or appealing (e.g. less physically burdensome) jobs within the agriculture sector.

[J-PAL Gender and Economic Agency Initiative (GEA):](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/initiative/gender-and-economic-agency-initiative) The GEA initiative aims to build a strong body of evidence on policies and programs to promote women’s work and enhance women’s economic agency in East Africa and South Asia. GEA works to develop policy-relevant insights from this research to drive programming, strategies, and policymaking on women’s work in both formal and informal employment. In addition, as there is a growing need to identify and test key indicators for women’s empowerment and agency, GEA seeks to enhance the availability and scale of improved metrics for these outcomes.

**Funding**

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1. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\_795453.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\_795453.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\_795453.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\_795453.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/256001490191438119/pdf/WPS8011.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In rare circumstances, proposals with a compelling reason for requesting more than $400,000 may be considered on a case-by-case basis. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Please note that full evaluations requesting less than $75,000 are considered full research projects and evaluated accordingly. The criteria for pilot funding apply only to proposals requesting funds to conduct piloting, or pre-randomization, activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Please note that PhD students are eligible to submit a maximum of two travel/proposal development grant applications and two pilot/full study proposals during their time as graduate students. All else equal, priority will be given to graduate students who have not applied before. Applicants who received travel/proposal development funding as graduate students but have since moved to another institution may only apply for funding to continue that same project, and may not apply for funding for unrelated projects unless they have since become a J-PAL affiliate or JOI invited researcher. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In addition, no spouse, partner, or immediate family member (parent, child, or sibling) of any individual named on a proposal application may serve as a peer or board referee in the round in which the applicant’s proposal is being reviewed. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)