

Lewis, Vance Johnson

Article

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Organization Management Journal (OMJ)

Provided in Cooperation with:

Eastern Academy of Management (EAM) and Southwest Academy of Management (SWAM)

Suggested Citation: Lewis, Vance Johnson (2025) : Academia's gig economy: Visiting professors, Organization Management Journal (OMJ), ISSN 1541-6518, Emerald, Leeds, Vol. 22, Iss. 1, pp. 31-37, <https://doi.org/10.1108/OMJ-10-2024-2320>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/338213>

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Academia's gig economy: visiting professors

Vance Johnson Lewis

*Department of Business Administration, Northeastern State University,
Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, USA and Department of Marketing and Management,
Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA*

Organization
Management
Journal

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Received 9 October 2024
Revised 17 October 2024
Accepted 17 October 2024

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine the growing trend of Visiting professorships in higher education, drawing parallels with the gig economy and exploring its implications for academia.

Design/methodology/approach – This perspective paper combines personal experience, literature review and analysis of current trends in higher education employment practices.

Findings – The increasing use of Visiting professors in academia mirrors the broader gig economy trends but poses unique challenges in the higher education context. These challenges include potential negative impacts on organizational culture, faculty motivation and long-term institutional goals.

Practical implications – This paper highlights the need for higher education administrators to reconsider the use of Visiting professorships and their potential long-term consequences on faculty development, institutional culture and educational quality.

Social implications – The trend toward more temporary faculty positions may have broader implications for the future of tenure, academic freedom and the overall structure of higher education institutions.

Originality/value – This paper provides a unique perspective on the intersection of the gig economy and academia, offering insights into the experiences of Visiting professors and the potential consequences of this employment trend for higher education institutions.

Keywords Gig economy, Faculty, Visiting professors, Tenure, Higher education

Paper type Viewpoint

According to my nephew Carson, a gig worker is someone who does one project and then moves on to another one and is not a full-time employee anywhere. While maybe lacking in finesse, this definition is not decidedly different than the basic dictionary definition of a gig worker which reads: *a person who does temporary or freelance work, especially an independent contractor engaged on an informal or on-demand basis*. And while Carson is not (yet) a household name, he is an expert on the topic. As one of the 76.4 million Americans who work in the gig economy, a number expected to rise to 86.5 million over the next five years making gig workers 50% of the American economy (Duarte, 2024), he has known nothing but gig work since earning his bachelor's degree in computer engineering in 2020.

Predominated by those in computer programming, marketing, IT and business consulting, many find working in the gig economy to be very satisfying. In a survey conducted by



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Organization Management Journal
Vol. 22 No. 1, 2025
pp. 31-37
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1541-6518
p-ISSN: 2753-8567
DOI 10.1108/OMJ-10-2024-2320

Upwork, participants indicated reasons for being in the gig to include setting one's own schedule, being one's own boss, working from a location of their choosing and pursuing work about which they have passion. The flip side to this is that the majority surveyed indicate they are working in the gig economy to supplement their income thus indicating that many are gig's out of underemployment in full-time positions rather than truly seeking the gig lifestyle (Kempton, 2023). More troubling for the gigs, as reported by The Economic Policy Institute, is that they are often not protected by anti-discrimination laws, receive no benefits and are paid less than their W-2 earning counterparts (Zipperer, McNicholas, Poydock, Schneider, & Harknett, 2022). While data on the number of gigs who convert their freelance job into a full-time jobs is unavailable, a recent article from *Forbes* was not promising for those hoping to accomplish this. While employers are well aware of the gig economy, they are skeptical of hiring gig workers, being suspicious of their "job hopping" and questioning why they could not find a full-time job in the first place (Kelly, 2024).

Academic gig economy

For academia, while the gig economy might be a new area for research, we have been at the forefront of temporary, no benefits, low hours work for decades: Adjuncts. Although historically adjuncts, now often renamed "contingents," were experts brought in from the community to offer their specialized knowledge on a specialized topic, the plight of the adjunct has devolved into a part-time, no-security role, which currently comprises roughly 30% of the academic work force (TIAA). Often adjuncts are viewed as abused teachers salivating at the thought of a full-time position; however, while half would prefer a full-time appointment, two-thirds are satisfied with their adjunct positions (Yakoboski, 2018). Even I found that Business Adjuncts were highly satisfied with their positions, something I found correlated to their teaching in addition to their full-time employment (Lewis & McKinzie, 2020), just as do the satisfied gig workers.

While adjuncts have continued to roll along on their journeys, a new gig employee has shown up on the college campus: Visiting Professor. Defining what is meant by a "Visiting" professor itself seems rather difficult. While our colleagues at Harvard (2024) have provided us with a definition: *a short-term, non-tenure-track teaching position that is held by an individual who ordinarily continues to hold a tenure-track or tenured position at another academic institution*; a search of the mainstream finds a crass collection of definitions which ultimately add up to *glorified substitute*. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) makes little mention of "Visiting" (outside of lawsuits) other than mentioning in their 2015–2016 salary report that "Visiting" had been moved from full-time ranked faculty to "lecturer," the same contingent category which includes adjuncts. However, adjuncts teach per-class while Visitors take on full-time job responsibilities, both in and out of the classroom.

While in their 2020 "Guiding Principles and Standards for Business Accreditation," The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) offers that faculty titles can help explain the work of faculty, the word "Visiting" appears only once without definition under "Faculty Sufficiency." Conversely, The Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs' Unifying Standards makes no mention of titles or "Visiting" (ACBSP, 2024). While ranks such as "tenured" and "Associate Professor" seem to have basic universal understanding, "Visiting" seems to be discretionary to individual institutions in both full-time or part-time status and duration of the appointment.

An unexpected gig – a lived experience

Unlike my nephew, I was not interested in being a gig worker; rather, I wanted as much stability as possible. Having successfully earned tenure and promotion to Associate

Professor of Management in 2022 at The University of Central Arkansas, I anticipated that the remainder of my career would not be spent under the cloud of a looming vote (which was a unanimous “yes” for those interested) but rather that the clouds had parted and finally I was going to be driving my own career. Although my position at UCA was perfectly acceptable, when I received what appeared to be a dream offer – to be an Associate Professor focusing on the MBA Strategy course – from Southeastern Oklahoma State University, I took a deep breath and jumped at it, even though it did not come with tenure upon hire. If you look at my affiliation at the top of this article, you may probably deduce that the dream job was anything but and sadly, yet mercifully, came to an end nine months later.

During those nine months, I was very fortunate to have a great network and some very good opportunities came my way leaving me to make a choice. Through one of those serendipitous “someone talked to someone” moments, I received an out-of-the-blue offer to join Oklahoma City University where, among several classes, I would still get to teach the MBA Capstone ... the holy grail of master degree level business schools! The catch: the position was a one year “Visiting” until a decision could be made about filling the retiring tenured professor’s position. While turning down solid, long-term positions was tough, having spent my whole career, both student and professional, at state schools, I looked at the situation and thought “this might be your only opportunity to ever work at a private liberal arts school ... and not just any private liberal arts school. This is the school that has statues dedicated to Miss America winners and alumnus Kristen Chenoweth randomly shows up on campus.” SOLD! Just like many gig workers, I took advantage of the chance to learn and do new things.

So what is the issue?

According to *Forbes*, the three reasons that corporations are moving toward the use of gig employees are labor shortages, advances in technology and increased inflation (Gibbons, 2022). While plausible in industry, these categories fall short of explaining why business universities are embracing the Visiting professor concept. According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, there are roughly 100,000 college-level business teachers in the USA, a number expected to grow by roughly 8% over the next few years (2022). Inversely, the National Science Foundation shows a decrease in the number of people earning doctoral degrees in business (Nahrgang, 2023). Common sense would then say that schools of business have the need to hire full-time permanent faculty rather than continuing to expand the ranks of “Visitors.”

The increases of technology also really make no sense when it comes to why Visitors are popping up on campus. According to *Forbes*, it is an increase in the ability, through technology, to match individuals with short-term contracts that has facilitated the growth of gig workers. Academia still relies heavily on extremely lengthy search processes and job posting sites to engage new employees. None of the technological advancements that are driving the gig economy are used by higher education and so the appearance of academic gigs seems rather illogical.

That leads us to the impacts of inflation. Specifically, *Forbes* mentions that inflation and current economic conditions have forced businesses to cut costs through the reduction of recruiting, benefits and training costs (Gibbons, 2022). As offered by Dunn & Halonon (2024), Visiting positions are an ideal way for administrators to address budget shortfalls which create a need to delay tenure-track hirings. This reasoning, however, is out of sync with what the industry is saying. Visiting professors are still recruited, subjected to an arduous interview process, receive benefits and receive about the same training that any faculty member would get. Given that recruitment and hiring are some of the most expensive

elements of any business, the increase in Visitors would seem to increase expenditures rather than decrease them because it forces the college to go through the hiring process more often than simply hiring a long-term employee.

While I can embrace some of the financial aspects, those issues could be placated by traditional Lecturers or the other group that has yet to be mentioned: Clinicals. While across campus this word has multiple meanings, in the business school these individuals are typically engaged on year-to-year meanings, and if they do their jobs well, like normal employees at normal organizations, can expect to continue in their jobs from year-to-year. These employees are usually more local to the area of the college (thus no relocation issues), are typically paid less than their tenure track counterparts, and are not required to do research. And it is here that perhaps we find the true reason for Visitors. Particularly in AACSB schools, faculty ratios and faculty sufficiency are central, with Scholarly Academic status being the brass ring. Scholarly Academics have to publish; Visitors have typically strayed or stumbled on the tenure track but still possess publishing skills and track records. Perhaps then the rise in the amount of Visitors is then a circumvention of the rules ... a way to maintain faculty sufficiency ratios without actually investing in the faculty members. Otherwise said politely, Visitors allow administrators to have rather one-sided relationships with their employees.

And quickly on the topic of tenure, where do these individuals fall into that caste system? Anecdotally, I cannot count the number of times I have heard “we are looking for a one-year Visitor, but the position might be made permanent,” a trap into which [Dunn & Halonon \(2024\)](#) warn Visitors to avoid. As the future of tenure becomes more precarious, this increase of faculty who look like tenured/tenure track faculty but are not tenured faculty is dangerous as it shows that all areas of academia – scholarship, teaching and service – can be achieved outside the tenure lines. Just as with the gig employees, this hiring trend might inspire more state legislators to embrace that all institutions can benefit from having flexibility within the faculty without the need for tenure or long-term contracts.

Why is this a concern?

This article is not a disguised hit piece on OCU (my one year position quickly became a two year position roughly three weeks into my employment) or on any school using Visiting professors but rather, a warning. In our management classrooms, we teach the importance of organizational culture and how it takes individuals time to acclimate to a new position. We espouse the importance of the team formation process, stressing the need for storming and norming prior to performing. We tell our students of the importance of goal setting and expectancy in motivating employees to perform at their best. Visiting professors receive none of these things! They arrive and nine months later they are gone. Some may be particularly blessed to have a department in which strong efforts are made to integrate them into the culture but in all honesty, there is little motivation for one to want to integrate into a culture in which they know they will be gone when final grades are posted. Past this, most Visiting positions are based on teaching needs, forcing Visitors to place their research agenda on the back burner (a mistake I readily admit I made). Publications are the currency of academia and even in a short nine-month period, the teaching demands on the Visitor can destroy the marketability of their research agenda.

Higher education is about relationships and long-term investments. We establish advising centers, student activities and young alumni groups all in an effort to create long-standing relationships between the institution and the student. We encourage faculty to have open doors and to invest in the students outside of just the classroom. We even force ourselves to endure five or six years of being tenure track just to make sure we are a “good fit.” These

efforts bear no correlation to the individuals we invite to work in our organization for 263 days.

And what of the Visitor as a human? One of the key drawbacks to the gig economy is the lack of job security. We know from organizational behavior that financial uncertainty makes it difficult to do one's job well. Even Maslow warned us that until our lower-level needs of safety and security are met, one cannot achieve self-actualization, aspects of which are key to successful work as a college professor. So too from Maslow, we know the importance of belongingness ... having meaningful relationships. Eventually, the Visitor does leave campus for the day and if they are lucky, they go home to a partner and perhaps children (human or furry); but remember, the Visitor has most likely just arrived in their location. According to researcher Jeff Hall (2019), it takes roughly 40–60 hours just to form a casual friendship. For those over 30, which most likely any Visitor would be, just having simple opportunities to meet people decreases significantly (Bhattacharya, Ghosh, Monsivais, Dunbar, & Kaski, 2016). Coupled with that the Visitor knows they are going to be leaving within a year and the situation is set up for the Visitor to have exceedingly misaligned work/life balance leading to issues of loneliness and isolation, both predictors of poor job performance.

Speaking from my own experiences, during my 18 months as a Visitor, I have found myself questioning why I should invest so much in my work knowing fully that in May of 2025, my Visiting position will no longer exist. For instance, I served on the college curriculum committee and was even elected Chairperson of the University Curriculum Committee! Ultimately, I know, as a Visitor, that I am aiding in planning a curriculum in which I will not be a participant. As offered by Locke in his Goal Setting Theory, the ability to make and achieve long-term goals is a key factor in an employee's motivation to perform. Nine months can hardly be called long term.

Call to action

The gig economy is predicted to grow to 50% of the US economy by 2027 (Gibbons, 2022) but those who flourish in this economy are not those who hold doctorates and post-doctorates. To the administrators, I encourage you to reevaluate this trend of using this rotating door of Visitors rather than committing to the long-term goals of your departments. Let go of the antiquated idea that professors can only be hired at certain times of the year and make offers on which professors can build their senses of security and belongingness. Avoid thinking that if you wait longer to make a permanent decision, you will get someone better ... if the Visitor is good enough now, they are good enough to stay a while! Keep the experience of your students focused and create college environments with strong cultures by embracing long-term participation by faculty.

And to the Visitors, stick to your guns. While for some, if you truly want to embrace the gig mentality of not making a long-term commitment and experience multiple different environments, I say follow your heart; but be aware, especially for those at the beginning of your academic careers that your clock is ticking down and that taking a Visiting position may negatively impact any future opportunities. Keep in mind that, as reported by Poets and Quants, at the top 26 US Business School, 239 new professors were hired in 2022. Of those 239, 168 were being hired into their first academic position (Ethier, 2022). Our industry prefers "potential" over proven success (along with a litany of what in any other industry would be blatant discrimination and biases). If faced with a choice between a permanent position at a less desirable school or a Visiting position, take the permanent position! As stated by one of my graduate professors, you get your best job offer out of college. Taking the Visiting position with the hope that it will result in a better offer next year is not doing yourself justice. Keep your career under your control.

Hope for the visitors

While many may try, no one can take your happiness away other than yourself. Ultimately for me, be a senior Tenured Professor or a Visiting Substitute, no one can take away my joy in investing in my students and seeing them succeed. In the end, regardless of the contract on which the faculty member works, the students themselves are going to move on. Although I experienced the normal struggles of adjusting to a new organization at OCU, I quickly became attached to my students and enjoyed being a part of their journey. At the spring graduation, I fully admit I let go of a few tears. When asked why, the answer was simple: I am proud of them and I am going to miss them. I was the one who mentored them through their first business consultation, their job searches, graduate school applications and senioritis. OCU is a small school and so I had almost all the undergraduate business students in two different classes (Principles and Capstone). The word “Visiting” meant nothing to them (most never noticed) and while I may not be at OCU for future students, nothing will change that I WAS here for *THIS* year’s students and I did make an impact.

Epilogue

This paper was originally selected for publication in October of 2024, at which time I was actively seeking permanent employment. Shortly thereafter, despite repeated comments from members of the OCU faculty assuring me of a forthcoming invitation to remain permanently, I was informed that despite my 14 years of academic service, including having been tenured at an R3 school and being editor of an ABDC journal, that I was not as qualified as three yet-to-graduate candidates...just as Dunn and Halonon (2024) warned. Thankfully though, at the same time, I was invited to join the team Northeastern State University as an Associate Professor of Strategic Management where I believe I have found where I will remain the rest of my career...no intentions of going visiting again.

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Corresponding author

Vance Johnson Lewis can be contacted at: lewis143@nsuok.edu