



## THE GIG ECONOMY AND ITS ROLE IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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**Abstract:**

The gig economy, characterized by temporary and freelance employment, is reshaping traditional workforce structures across various industries, including academic libraries. This paper explores the implications of gig-based work in academic library settings, analyzing its benefits, challenges, and potential strategies for adaptation. The advantages of gig employment in libraries include cost efficiency, flexibility, and access to specialized expertise, which facilitate innovation and enhanced digital services. However, this model also poses concerns related to workforce instability, inconsistent service quality, limited professional development opportunities, financial constraints, and legal complexities. As academic libraries increasingly integrate gig workers into their operations, they must adopt strategic approaches to balance flexibility with service sustainability. This paper highlights the need for hybrid employment models, professional development programs, fair labour policies, and technological advancements to ensure the effective implementation of gig work while preserving the integrity of library services. By navigating these challenges proactively, academic libraries can maintain their role as essential knowledge centres in an evolving economic landscape.

**Keywords:** Gig Economy, Academic Libraries, Impact, Library Services.

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**Introduction:**

A report by Niti Aayog highlights the rapid expansion of India's gig economy, which has become an integral part of the national labour market. In 2020-21, around 7.7 million individuals were employed in gig-based roles, constituting 1.5% of the total workforce and 2.6% of the non-agricultural sector. Projections indicate that by 2029-30, the gig workforce could grow to 23.5 million, accounting for 4.1% of the workforce overall and 6.7% of non-agricultural employment. Currently, medium-skilled jobs comprise 47% of gig work, while high-skilled and low-skilled roles account for 22% and 31%, respectively.

The gig economy is expected to contribute an additional 1.25% to India's GDP and has the potential to generate up to 90 million non-farm jobs in the long term. This growth underscores the increasing prominence of gig-based employment, bringing both

opportunities and challenges for policymakers and workers.

As the gig economy redefines traditional employment structures, the rise of short-term and contract-based jobs has introduced both flexibility and financial advantages for employers. However, concerns regarding job security, career development, and service continuity remain significant. Academic libraries are not immune to these trends, with many now incorporating gig workers for roles such as research assistance, digital content creation, and event coordination. This shift necessitates that academic libraries evolve strategically to ensure continued relevance and efficiency.

**Understanding the Gig Economy:**

The gig economy consists of independent contractors, freelancers, and temporary workers engaged on a project-by-project basis. Enabled by digital platforms,

this employment model has flourished in sectors like technology, transportation, and the creative industries. Increasingly, its influence is expanding into knowledge-based fields, including academic library services, reshaping traditional workforce structures and service delivery models.

### **Effects of the Gig Economy on Academic Libraries:**

The incorporation of gig-based employment in academic libraries has resulted in both advantages and drawbacks, influencing operational efficiency, service quality, and user experience.

### **Benefits of the Gig Economy in Academic Libraries:**

#### **1. Cost Savings and Workforce Flexibility**

By engaging freelancers or part-time staff for specific assignments, libraries can optimize staffing expenditures and minimize long-term financial commitments. This adaptability is particularly beneficial during peak periods or for project-specific tasks.

#### **2. Access to Specialized Expertise**

Gig workers often bring valuable expertise in areas such as digital preservation, data management, and content creation. Their contributions enable libraries to undertake specialized initiatives, such as digitization projects, without requiring permanent hires. Additionally, their proficiency with digital tools enhances virtual services, benefiting remote learners and non-traditional students.

#### **3. Innovation and Rapid Adaptation**

Freelancers introduce fresh perspectives and innovative approaches, facilitating the adoption of new technologies and services. The temporary nature of their roles allows libraries to experiment with emerging trends without the constraints of permanent staffing adjustments.

### **Challenges of the Gig Economy in Academic Libraries:**

#### **1. Workforce Instability and High Turnover**

A reliance on temporary workers often leads to

frequent staff turnover, disrupting service continuity and diminishing institutional knowledge. This inconsistency can negatively affect user experiences and the overall quality of library services.

#### **1. Limited Professional Development Opportunities**

Gig workers typically lack access to training, mentorship, and career advancement pathways available to full-time staff. This limitation can hinder their professional growth and reduce the overall impact of their contributions. Additionally, their lack of deep integration into library culture may result in fragmented service delivery.

#### **2. Variability in Service Quality**

Since gig workers possess varying levels of experience and familiarity with library systems, service consistency may be affected. For instance, differences in research support quality could arise depending on the freelancer's expertise and understanding of institutional resources.

#### **3. Financial Constraints and Budgetary Concerns**

Although gig-based employment can offer short-term cost savings, excessive dependence on temporary workers may pose long-term financial challenges. Over time, reductions in permanent staffing could lead to budget constraints, limiting the development of new services and investments in infrastructure.

#### **4. Legal and Ethical Considerations**

Contract management, intellectual property rights, and equitable compensation are complex issues when dealing with freelance workers. Academic libraries must navigate these legal concerns carefully to avoid disputes while ensuring fair treatment and compensation for gig workers. Additionally, the absence of benefits such as healthcare and retirement plans raises questions about the ethical implications of relying heavily on gig labor.

### Strategies for Adapting to the Gig Economy:

To address the challenges associated with gig-based employment, academic libraries can implement the following strategies:

- Hybrid Employment Models: Combining permanent staff with gig workers ensures service continuity while allowing for flexibility in staffing.
- Investment in Professional Development: Offering training opportunities to temporary staff can improve service quality and foster long-term engagement.
- Leveraging Technology: Using digital tools effectively can enhance efficiency without compromising service quality.
- Advocating for Fair Labor Practices: Encouraging policies that protect gig workers' rights can help ensure ethical employment practices.
- Collaboration with Educational Institutions: Establishing career pathways for aspiring librarians can help integrate gig workers into the profession more effectively.

### Conclusion:

The gig economy presents both benefits and challenges for academic libraries. While offering cost efficiency and access to specialized skills, it also raises concerns regarding workforce stability, service quality, and ethical labour practices. To navigate these changes successfully, academic libraries must adopt strategic approaches that balance flexibility with institutional integrity. By fostering innovation while ensuring fair labour practices, academic libraries can sustain their mission of delivering reliable and high-quality information services. As the gig economy continues to evolve, libraries must remain adaptable and forward-

thinking to leverage its opportunities while mitigating its potential drawbacks.

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