

OPINION

Extra \$300 gives low-income workers choices

They can decide what's best and safest for them



Melissa Gopnik
Commonwealth

Are people deciding not to return to work because they are getting an extra \$300 a week in federal unemployment benefits during the COVID-19 emergency? That question is coming up repeatedly as government reports show jobs going unfilled and many governors are starting to cut off the extra money.

But it's the wrong question. We should be asking what's the problem with that?

Shouldn't low-income workers have a privilege to choose, just like higher-income workers? And shouldn't companies be wondering why people don't want to take their jobs?

Last year, research found that people want to work, but only if they don't have to jeopardize their health or the health of their families, and if they have good quality child care. The only thing that has changed since then is that the unemployment supplement has gone down, from \$600 a week to \$300.

Thanks to these extra payments, some lower-income families, disproportionately Black and Latinx, have been able to do what many others take for granted – make choices. They have been able to choose to take care of their health and the health of their loved ones; choose to keep their children safe by staying home with them; choose to increase their skills; choose to not go back to workplaces that are unsafe, physically or psychologically.

A bargain at \$300

More recent research found that nearly 3 million women left the U.S. workforce because of the pandemic, many of them quitting because of a lack of child care options.

White privilege, male privilege, economic privilege – all of these are talked about extensively. What they all have in common is a fundamental privilege denied to so many: the privilege to make choices that reflect one's own specific situation, values and aspirations.

For some low-income workers, this privilege can be obtained for just \$300 a week.

Business owners should focus on why workers, when they gain the privilege of making a choice, are choosing not to work for them. A business model that is built on an HR strategy of having a workforce that is captive – people working for you because they have no other choice – should not be economically viable and should not be the driver of government policy.

As an HR professional working at nonprofits for more than 20 years, I have interviewed hundreds of job seekers. In the nonprofit ecosystem, there is an assumption that applicants want to work for your organization because of a commitment to your mission.

Design jobs people want

Imagine a world where this same assumption could be made for all workplaces. There is instead an assumption that for some jobs, people will only take them if they have no other choices.

Can we not design a service job that someone actually wants?

At Helen's, a local family-owned res-



Employment agency in Manchester, N.H., in March. CHARLES KRUPA/AP

taurant my family has been going to for 15 years, the waitstaff has almost never changed. I have heard stories about similar establishments in communities across the country. If they can do it, so can others.

We know, intuitively and based on research, how to design a "good" job. It is a job that fulfills not just your basic needs for safety, food and shelter but also your need for self-actualization. A good job is about more than just a fair wage. A good job is where you are treated with basic human dignity and respect. A good job is one where you are not expected to put up with sexual harassment or racism.

I could cite the numerous studies finding that people with jobs that meet these needs are more productive, engaged and stay longer. But anyone who has ever supervised an engaged employee and a disgruntled employee, or has been one of these employees, doesn't need data to know this is true.

The unstated assumption is that only certain people should be able to choose a "good job." Lower-income Americans are expected to take whatever job is offered. The temporary increase in federal unemployment benefits has upended that expectation.

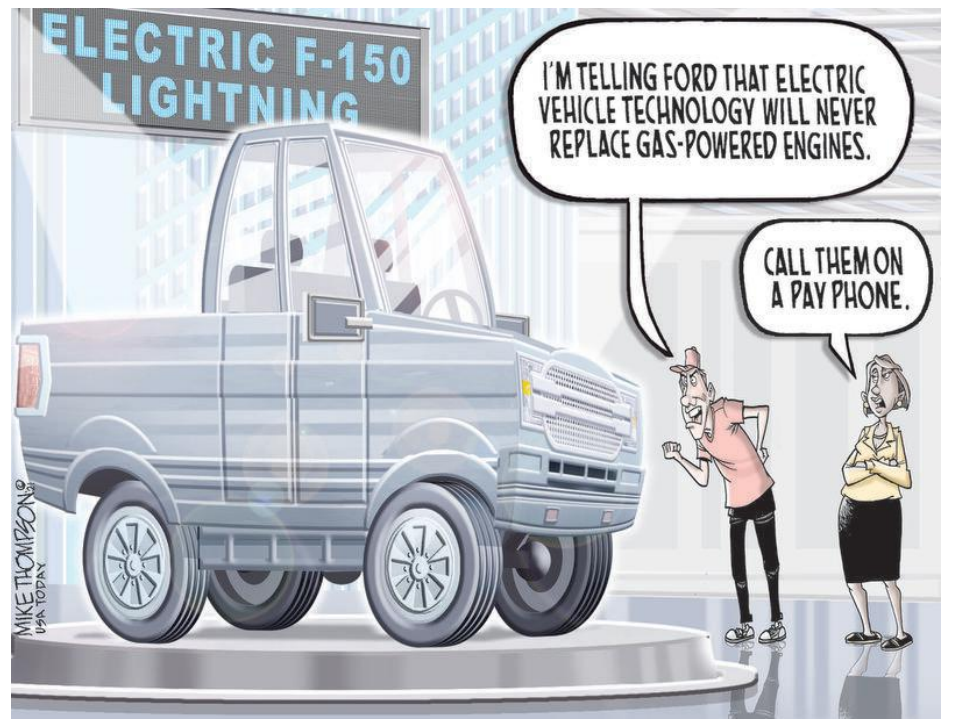
Exposing who has choices

Checks from a newly expanded child tax credit will start going out in July, and that will give families even more choices as they decide whether the payments should be used for child care or for a parent to continue caring for children at home.

The theme of 2020 was bringing into the light the many systemic inequities built into our economic, political and cultural systems. The pushback against additional federal payments has exposed the inequity of who gets to make choices about where they work. Business owners and HR professionals should think of this as an opportunity for innovation and experimentation. Last year was a year of rethinking many of the fundamentals of how businesses operate.

In 2021, we should rethink how we design jobs so that everyone has the privilege to pick a job that is good for them and their families.

Melissa Gopnik is a senior vice president at Commonwealth, a national nonprofit focused on financial security.



MIKE THOMPSON/USA TODAY NETWORK

Living in Gaza, I'm too afraid to sleep

Losing friends means my family can be next



Rahf Al Hallaq
Student

GAZA CITY – When my grandfather drove over recently to bring my mom something from my grandma, I suddenly felt an enormous urge to go down to meet him, which is something I don't always do when he just comes to drop something and leaves.

Since the bombings started May 10, I've been grasping at any chance I have to meet my loved ones, because that chance might be my last. Everyone in Gaza these days talks to their family members, friends and even followers on social media as if this might be their last time speaking to them. The traumatizing reality we are living here, and the constant fear of losing one's family, friends, house, memories and everything that makes one human, has turned us into people who live to survive the day.

Every day is our last day, every breath is our last breath, every word, hug or kiss is our last.

Israel and Hamas agreed Thursday to a cease-fire. But I can't forget, even when there weren't any bombings in the area, the nerve-racking sound of Israeli drones buzzing above your head. It is enough to give you a perpetual sense of danger. Reminding you that no matter when or where you are in Gaza, you're not safe. Trying to sleep with that sound over your head is a different nightmare altogether.

People in Gaza now have barely had any sleep. We only sleep after we reach a level of fatigue where we can no longer stay awake, and we just drop almost unconscious.

We're awake and alert most of the time in case we have to evacuate our houses and run for our lives. That's supposing the Israeli occupation forces gave us the chance to escape in the first place before leveling our homes to the ground.

Two of my classmates, Zainab Al

Kolak and Rewaa Al Zamly, did not have the privilege of being warned before their houses were bombed.

Rewaa told me, "We weren't given any warning. We just suddenly saw our roof falling over our heads."

Rewaa's sister-in-law, who was five months pregnant, was killed by the Israeli missile strike along with her 2-year-old daughter, Rewaa's niece.

"We caught my nephew as he was flying in the air by miracle, or we would have lost him too," she said.

Rewaa's mother was pulled out of the rubble and was also severely injured.

As to Zainab's story, well the least I can say was that my friend Zainab survived a massacre. She lost 22 members of her family, including her mother, Amal, her two brothers, Taher and Ahmad, and her only sister, Hanaa. She was injured and had to undergo surgery.

While reading these stories, you are probably thinking of them as something alien that you will never experience even if they devastate you, and I absolutely hope that they remain so. But to people here in Gaza, these stories are an indisputable reality.

Rewaa texted in our American literature group chat, "Guys please pray that they pull my mom and sister-in-law alive from under the rubble."

I remember the shivers those words sent down my spine. It suddenly struck me that death was much closer to me than I imagined. This could be me. This could be any one of us. It made me ask myself once more the questions I always ask myself: I was lucky enough to survive multiple aggressions on Gaza Strip before, one of which lasted for 51 days in 2014. Will that luck be enough to make me survive yet another? It seems I have. But how soon will the next conflict start? What if it's our turn next time?

The sight of my young siblings playing and laughing together always makes me smile, but ever since the bombings started that smile has always been accompanied by a painful pang.

The pang that comes after remembering I might lose them in a split second, and laughter could be turned into a deafening cold silence.

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Israeli airstrike on Gaza City on May 15. Since May 10, more than 230 Palestinians have been killed. In Israel, a dozen people have been killed.

MOHAMMED ABED/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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