

Work emails, calls on golf course worsen performance, study finds

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Checking your work-related emails or taking business calls while playing golf could prevent you from hitting that elusive eagle or birdie. This is according to a group of researchers from the Department of Information

Science at Stellenbosch University (SU).

They surveyed 186 recreational golfers at five different clubs on their performance, enjoyment of the round, and [smartphone use](#) during play. The data was collected directly after the golfers played in mid-week club competitions. The participants were asked to indicate how frequently they used their phones for work-related calls, emails, WhatsApp messages, personal calls and social media during the round.

The findings of their study were [published](#) in the *International Journal of Performance Analysis in Sport*.

"We found that when golfers used their phones for personal reasons, like checking [social media](#) feeds or responding to messages, their performance was unaffected. However, when they read work-related emails or took business calls, their performance dropped," says lead researcher Dr. Daniël le Roux from the Cognition and Technology Research Group in the Department of Information Science at SU.

He conducted the study with postgraduate students Lise Carstens, Cole Walburgh and Christen Werth.

"Interestingly, our data did not show a direct impact of smartphone use on golfers' enjoyment of the round. However, as any [golfer](#) would attest, performance is key to enjoying the round.

"Our study highlights the dual-edged nature of smartphones on the [golf](#) course. While they offer convenience of staying connected, their intrusion can impair focus and performance, and ultimately make the game less enjoyable," adds Le Roux.

"We shouldn't underestimate the power of digital distraction which refers to instances when an individual switches their attention away from

an ongoing, primary activity (e.g. a conversation, work, driving or a round of golf), towards a secondary activity that involves the use of a computing device like a smartphone or a tablet," he explains.

"For example, during a round of golf, the use of a smartphone for distance measurement would be considered an on-task activity and, by extension, not an instance of digital distraction. However, reading a work-related email or answering a business call between shots would constitute digital distraction since it is qualitatively unrelated to the task of playing golf."

Le Roux says that although [sustained attention](#) is known to be important for golf performance, there are very few studies on how recreational golfers manage their attention between shots, except for a small number of studies on elite golfers.

He points to a 2015 survey that Golf Digest conducted among 233,000 golfers to test their attitudes towards smartphone use on the course.

The majority of respondents (44%) indicated that they check or use their smartphone every few holes during a round, with 21% indicating that they are "inextricably linked to their phone" and would not be able to play a round without checking it. While 19% of respondents indicated that they carried their smartphones in their pockets, 66% indicated that they tried to forget about them during play.

"Interestingly, however, nobody seems to have investigated how the use of smartphones during play affects golfers' performance and enjoyment of their rounds," says Le Roux.

"Arguably, using a smartphone during play could disrupt a player's concentration and, consequently, impair their performance. This, in turn, may decrease their enjoyment of the round."

So, why are some forms of smartphone use more harmful than others?

The answer may lie in attention residue, according to Le Roux.

"Attention residue describes how content of an email or a conversation remains in our minds after we put our phones away. It is likely that these lingering thoughts make it difficult for golfers to focus clearly during shot routines. Work-related communications seem to generate more attention residue than other forms of smartphone use."

Le Roux says recreational golfers who want to concentrate better should be aware that using their smartphones could have a negative impact on their performance during play.

"They should identify which smartphone activities disrupt their focus during shots and generate high levels of attention residue. Knowing this, they can develop strategies that can help them avoid those distractions by blocking certain notifications or setting their phones to silent mode."

He and his co-researcher are, however, hesitant to propose that recreational golfers can enhance their performance by abstaining from using their phones when they play.

More information: DB le Roux et al, The effects of smartphone use during play on performance and enjoyment among recreational golfers, *International Journal of Performance Analysis in Sport* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/24748668.2024.2348285](https://doi.org/10.1080/24748668.2024.2348285)

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