

Bosses who 'phone snub' their employees risk losing trust, engagement

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Supervisors who cannot tear themselves away from their smartphones while meeting with employees risk losing their employees' trust and, ultimately, their engagement, according to new research from Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business. Credit: iStock

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James A. Roberts, Ph.D., professor of marketing, and Meredith David, Ph.D., assistant professor of marketing, published their latest study - "Put Down Your Phone and Listen to Me: How Boss Phubbing Undermines the Psychological Conditions Necessary for Employee Engagement" - in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*. Roberts and David are known nationally and internationally for researching the affects of [smartphone](#) use on relationships.

Their newest study examines "boss phubbing" (boss phone snubbing), which the researchers define as "an [employee's](#) perception that his or her

[supervisor](#) is distracted by his or her smartphone when they are talking or in close proximity to each other" and how that activity affects the supervisor-employee relationship.

"Our research reveals how a behavior as simple as using a cellphone in the workplace can ultimately undermine an employee's success," the researchers wrote. "We present evidence that boss phubbing lowers employees' trust in their supervisors and ultimately leads to lower employee engagement."

The research is composed of three studies that surveyed 200, 95 and 118 respondents, respectively. Those 413 who were surveyed - representing both supervisors and employees - responded to statements that assessed the nature of their work, levels of trust and engagement. Examples of survey statements included: "My boss places his/her cellphone where I can see it when we are together," "When my boss' cellphone rings or beeps, he/she pulls it out even if we are in the middle of a conversation" and "I can rely on my supervisor to keep the promises he/she makes."

The study found:

- 76 percent of those surveyed showed a lack of trust in a supervisor who phubbed them
- 75 percent showed decreases in psychological meaningfulness, psychological availability and psychological safety
- The lack of trust and decreases in those key areas led to a 5 percent decrease in [employee engagement](#)

"Employees who experience boss phubbing and have lower levels of trust for their supervisor are less likely to feel that their work is valuable or conducive to their own professional growth, and employees who work under the supervision of an untrusted, phubbing supervisor tend to have lower

confidence in their own ability to carry out their job," David said. "Both of those things negatively impact engagement."

Roberts, who authored the book "Too Much of a Good Thing: Are You Addicted to Your Smartphone?," said this study offers significant managerial implications.

"Phubbing is a harmful behavior," he said. "It undermines any corporate culture based on respect for others. Thus, it is crucial that corporations create a culture embodied by care for one another."

David said employees and supervisors alike cannot be fully present in face-to-face interactions when distracted by their smartphones.

"Developing the self-control to put away your smartphone in favor of meaningful, distraction-free interactions with your supervisor and other coworkers will yield benefits that far outweigh that text message, unread email or social media post," she said.

The study offered several steps that managers could take to change the culture and mitigate the negative effects of smartphone use.

- Create a culture in which supervisors do not feel pressure to immediately respond to emails and messages from their superiors while meeting with their employees.
- Structure performance criteria in a manner which motivates bosses to build healthy superior-subordinate relationships. This might include annual ratings by their subordinates.
- Train supervisors and employees on the importance of face-to-face interactions and sensitize them to the potentially negative consequences of phubbing on employee attitudes and engagement.
- Set formal smartphone policies by setting clear rules for smartphone use, access and security - and detail specific consequences for violating those rules.

Roberts and David said as smartphones become more ubiquitous, researchers need to continue to

study the implications in the workplace.

"Given that smartphone use in the workplace is nearly universal and has become an integral mode of communication, it is crucial that researchers investigate the impact of smartphone use in the workplace on career choices and adjustment," they wrote. "Today's employees face the real possibility that, left unattended to, smartphone use may complicate their careers by undermining vocational adjustment and lowering their job engagement."

More information: James A. Roberts et al. Put down your phone and listen to me: How boss phubbing undermines the psychological conditions necessary for employee engagement, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2017). DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2017.05.021

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