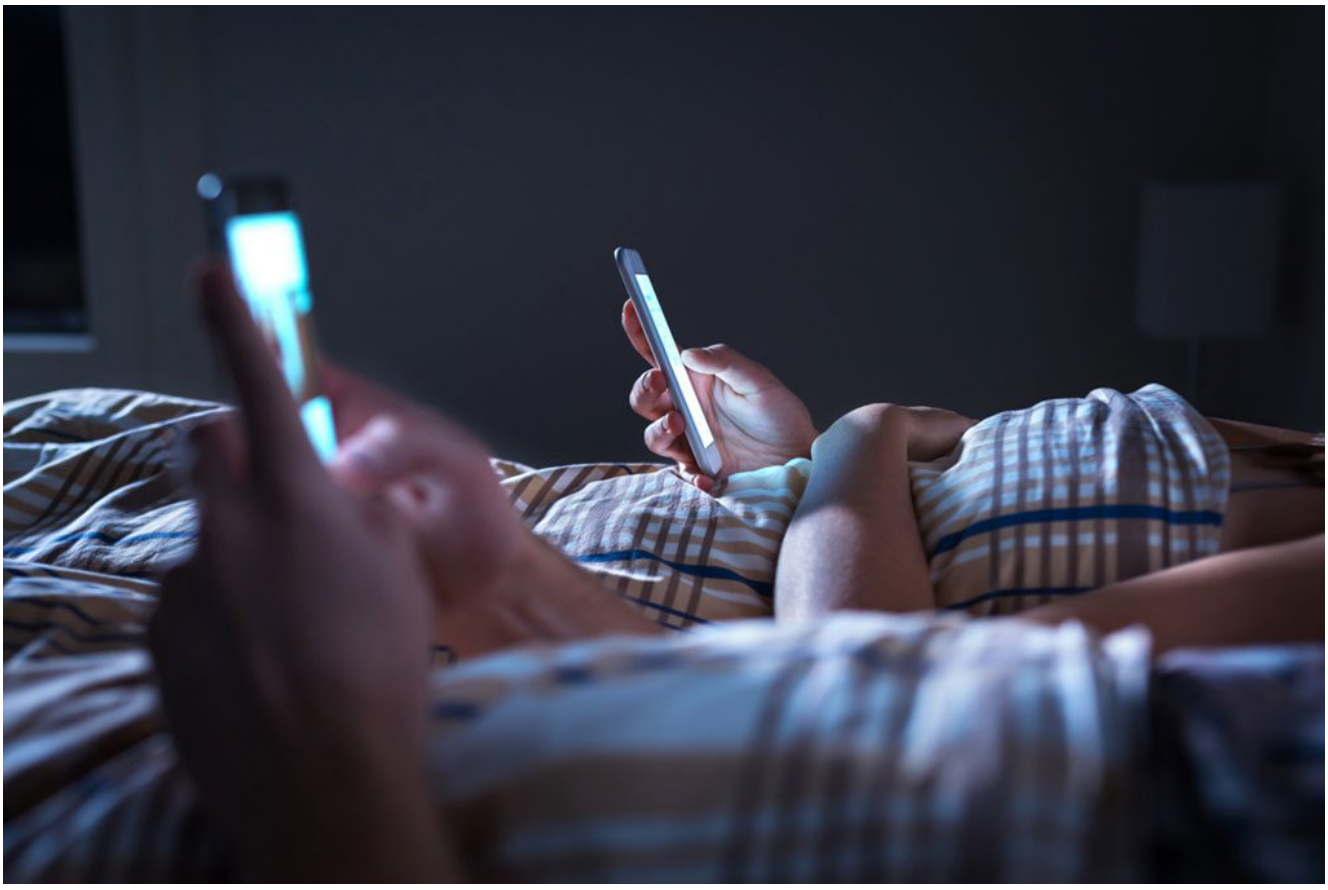
Disconnecting from digital devices is the ultimate creativity boost

New research looks at how digital interruptions at home affect couples' creativity at work.



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By this point, it's hardly news that overusing our phones and other devices leads us to feel less connected to the people around us. There's even a word for paying attention to your

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device while ignoring people who are physically present: “phubbing,” a portmanteau of phone and snubbing.

Being hyperconnected can damage family relationships and affect employee performance, according to research on its effects on family relationships by IESE professor Mireia Las Heras, along with Siqi Wang (Aston Business School), Yasin Rofcanin and Zeynep Yalabik (both from the University of Bath’s School of Management). They studied the role of mobile use in dual-earner couples and the knock-on effects of this in personal and professional spheres.

Digital disconnection = human connection

Your spouse can play a significant role in your career development and progression just by being supportive. Indeed, resource transfer between couples can up creativity at work, while the lack of a supportive spouse can be a limiting factor when it comes to climbing the career ladder.

The authors examined what happens in couples when digital distractions drive a wedge into a supportive home environment. They found that phubbing at home can weaken resource transfer between couples, affect the quality of the support each partner receives, drain personal resources such as energy and attention, and hinder communication. This behavior not only causes conflict and reduces relationship satisfaction; it also increases work-life conflict and reduces employee creativity.

The research also explores how spousal support can foster relational and cognitive job crafting at work. “Relational job crafting” refers to how employees intentionally modify the relational aspects of their work to make it more satisfying. “Cognitive job crafting” involves changing one’s perception or vision of work. Both types of job crafting are positively related to workplace creativity, as they allow employees to reimagine their tasks and redefine their relational networks at work.

Men, women and digital communication

The study revealed gendered differences in how men and women benefit from the support and attention of their spouse at home. Women are more negatively affected when their partner is regularly distracted by digital interruptions. Conversely, they benefit more from a supportive home environment. In contrast, for men, receiving support from their partners

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does not necessarily translate into greater creativity and proactivity in their tasks, relationships and perceptions of their work.

Women who experienced low levels of phubbing and received strong support from their partners showed a greater ability to establish social relationships at work and seize better learning opportunities. These women exhibited greater creativity, and they were better able to positively approach even tasks they disliked and contribute to the organization.

The differences may stem from traditional gender role stereotypes, as a clear separation of tasks tends to place women in situations where they require more resources to benefit from work-life balance. In other words, due to the additional expectations and responsibilities traditionally assigned to women at home, they need more support and resources to achieve harmony between family and work responsibilities.

Practical implications: what can managers do?

As the personal-professional spillover from phubbing shows, all companies need to be proactive to create an environment that supports work-life balance. How can managers look out for employee well-being and minimize non-essential digital interruptions?

It’s important to train supervisors to support work-life balance. You can’t dictate how couples communicate at home, but training can underline the importance of “sharing and communication and less exposure to technology and mobile use, particularly if it’s work related,” says Las Heras. Put another way, minimizing digital communications outside of office hours stands to benefit everyone.

Beyond this, workplaces can implement personalized job-crafting programs, as shifting employee perception can mediate the effects of phubbing. Both men and women responded positively to job crafting, which includes reconceptualizing everyday tasks in a more positive light and widening networks with different ideas and techniques.

Finally, given the differing needs of male and female employees, companies should devise programs to target each group’s challenges, such as targeted programs to support individuals returning after a career interruption, which disproportionately affects women. Programs should have components providing emotional and professional support.

About the research

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The study analyzed how phubbing impacted the career development of 65 couples where both partners worked full-time in the United States.

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