

Why More Female Executives Don't Play Golf—and Why That's a Problem

According to a new study, women miss out on a lot of networking opportunities by not playing the game

By Lisa Ward

April 13, 2023 12:00 pm ET



Many executives say playing golf benefits their careers, but only about a quarter of golfers are women.

ILLUSTRATION: EVA VAZQUEZ

Female executives face all sorts of barriers when it comes to using one of the great networking tools for business: golf.

That's according to a new study, identifying some of the benefits female executives derive from playing golf, as well as the reasons more female executives don't golf. The study's authors conducted a content analysis, reviewing almost 100 articles from academic journals, trade publications, general-interest publications and golf associations.

The Wall Street Journal spoke with Deborah Gray, a professor of marketing at Central Michigan University and one of the study's co-authors, about the

research. Here are edited excerpts of the conversation.

WSJ: *What were your overall conclusions?*

DR. GRAY: Golf is so much different than other networking activities. The game takes hours, and gives you a chance to learn about someone's life and personality. You learn how they react when things are not going well. You also get a sense of their integrity by seeing if they are honest on the course. Not surprisingly, many executives say their careers benefit from playing golf. We found one article stating that 71% of Fortune 1000 CEOs reported doing business with someone they met on the golf course, and another article that said 80% of Fortune 500 executives say golf has helped their career.

But only about a quarter of all golfers are women. That's a problem because women's careers may benefit just as much as their male counterparts. By not golfing, women not only miss out on the experience but also conversations about the experience. They also miss out on the chance to be more visible within their organization, converse with decision makers and put themselves in a better position for promotions.

WSJ: *Your literature review also found that men and women often network differently.*

DR. GRAY: Academic researchers have found women's networks tend to include people who are more like themselves, whereas men's networks tend to be less homogeneous and more strategic and include more powerful people. One way men create more diverse networks is through golf. They connect with business associates over shared interest rather than a common background. Women should do that, too.

WSJ: *What are some of the barriers female executives may face when it comes to using golf as a networking tool?*

DR. GRAY: Women often have unequal access to leisure time. Female executives may be caring for children and aging parents in addition to their professional responsibilities. Consequently, they may prioritize paid work during business hours and skip networking opportunities. That's especially true for golf because it is very time consuming. Playing 18 holes of golf can take four to five hours.

WSJ: *Are there any barriers specific to the game of golf?*

DR. GRAY: Female executives may also spend more time worrying that they are not strong enough or good enough to play with male colleagues. But most people are just average golfers. According to the USGA, the average man's handicap is 14.1 and the average women's handicap is 28, which is a long way from being a scratch golfer.

Those numbers from the USGA also suggest that the average woman swings her club 12 more times over a round of golf, which isn't a lot of waiting time over 18 holes, especially if the ball is hit right down the fairway. A common misconception is that higher-handicap golfers, often assumed to be women, are slower golfers. But golfers with low handicaps can be slow, too. The key for any golfer is knowing when to pick up the ball.

But the idea that women play slower has been used by private golf clubs to exclude women from playing during popular times on the golf course, like Saturday morning, though the practice is now changing. Other parts of the game can be updated to be more inclusive. For instance, the forward-most tee is still frequently called the woman's tee, though some courses now suggest that someone's handicap dictates where they tee off. Male executives shouldn't just assume their female colleagues will tee off at a different spot.

WSJ: *Aren't more women starting to play golf?*

DR. GRAY: Major golf associations, including the LPGA, are running marketing campaigns to increase the number of women playing golf. These associations are also trying to get more girls to start playing the game. Girls now make up about 36% of all golfers ages 6 to 17 years old. But corporate America could definitely do more to get women into the game.

WSJ: *What can companies do to encourage more female golfers?*

DR. GRAY: Companies could teach employees more about networking and include golf as part of their training. They could even help employees evaluate gaps in their network and identify key people who can help them accomplish their career goals. I tell my business students to think about a round of golf like any other business meeting, and consider their objectives beforehand. After all,

few people would go into a meeting without an agenda. Companies could also sponsor golf lessons at local courses. The key is that it happens during the workday, just like other professional development activities, encouraging people who tend to skip after-hour events to participate. Lessons and clinics also provide opportunities for employee team building, so there are many reasons for employers to think about sponsoring golf lessons.

Ms. Ward is a writer in Vermont. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

Appeared in the April 17, 2023, print edition as 'Why More Female Executives Don't Play Golf—and Why That's a Problem'.
