



INTERNATIONAL
OMBUDS
ASSOCIATION

International Ombuds Association
Survey of Ombuds Practice 2021
(Data collected Spring 2022)

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Purpose of Survey

The IOA Practice Survey provides an important snapshot of the contemporary field of organizational ombuds based on responses from members of the International Ombuds Association (IOA) who were practicing ombuds during the calendar year 2021. This report provides general demographic information about the ombuds who participated in the study and information about the ways in which ombuds practice and function.

In this report, you will see data that reflect the responses of participants in the order in which the items were presented on the survey. With respect to response rate and the reporting of data in this report, please note that to protect the anonymity of participants, most data are reported in the aggregate. We would advise the reader to interpret this survey report with appropriate care. If you have specific questions about data that seem to have been omitted from this report, the survey team will do its best to clarify while being careful to protect individual participants and convey only that which can be appropriately generalized. The team's contact information is listed at the end of the Introduction.

Methodology

As in previous years, we invited and included members and associate members of IOA who were practicing ombuds as of December 31, 2021 to participate in the survey. Previous survey results and IOA member feedback were considered at length in the development of this survey.

In Spring 2022, email notices were sent to IOA members and associate members with a read-only copy of the survey, instructions for completing the survey, and the link to the online survey. In total, 303 members of IOA participated meaningfully in the survey. You may notice that, since this report reflects the sequence of the actual survey items, the total number of respondents gradually decreases reflecting survey attrition.

Participants who simultaneously held multiple ombuds roles during the 2021 calendar year (perhaps as contract or outsourced ombuds) were asked to repeat the survey for each position held.

Response Rate

The invitation to participate in the survey was sent to 780 eligible IOA members; therefore, the 235 survey respondents represent 30% of the eligible survey population. This is a significant increase in participation from previous years, and the survey team wishes to extend its sincere appreciation to those who contributed.

Reporting actual numbers/percentages or best estimates

Because no single universal method for tracking ombuds case information exists, participants were asked to either provide actual numbers and percentages or to provide their best estimate.

Key Terms and Definitions

Ombudsman/Ombuds/Ombudsperson: Consistent with IOA practice, the term ombudsman is used to communicate to the widest possible community and is not intended to discourage others from using alternatives. IOA respectfully acknowledges that many practitioners use alternative forms of this word. In the survey, we are using the terms ombuds and ombudsman interchangeably.

Constituency: Those people who reasonably might contact the ombudsman office in a given year; those the OO is expected to serve on a regular basis.

Contact: An interaction with a constituent that does not require action by the ombudsman. For instance, we did not ask about the number of phone calls made or emails sent to schedule an appointment, or when an ombudsman is simply asked to provide referral information.

Visitor: An individual who first contacts the ombudsman office. In some practices, a visitor might be called an inquirer or first contact. For our purposes, the visitor could be a single individual or a group of individuals contacting the ombuds together or individually, but knowingly as part of a group, with the same issue or issues.

Other party/parties: The individual (or individuals) with whom the visitor has a concern or issue, or with whom the visitor is in conflict. We are not using the term “responder” (a term which some ombuds use for people they call for information or advice in working with a visitor).

Case: A case occurs when a new visitor or group, or a previous visitor or group, presents a new problem or issue to the ombudsman that results in a discussion where the ombudsman helps to develop, discuss, and offer options. A case may or may not require multiple appointments with the visitor and/or other parties. We asked about caseload in this survey.

2022 Survey Team:

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Demographics

82% of survey participants worked the full 12 months of 2021.

For how many organizations do you serve as an ombuds? [N=301]

One	92.0%
Two or more	8.0%

How long have you served as an ombuds within your current organization? [N=302]

0 to 3 years	52.6%
4 to 6 years	20.5%
7 to 10 years	14.9%
11 or more	11.9%

How many years total have you worked as an ombuds anywhere, including at your present and any prior organizations? [N=303]

0 to 3 years	38.9%
4 to 6 years	17.5%
7 to 10 years	21.1%
11 or more years	22.4%

How is your work as ombuds in this organization configured? [N=301]

Full-time as ombuds	64.8%
Half-time as ombuds	7.6%
Less than half-time as ombuds	4.0%
Collateral duty as ombuds (in addition to another role)	14.6%
Contracted	9.0%

How would you describe your employment arrangement? [N=300]

As an employee of the organization	85.0%
Contracted directly with the organization to provide ombuds services	9.3%
Employed by a firm providing contracted or outsourced ombuds services	1.3%
Other	4.3%

Ombudsman Role, Mandate, Structures, Budget

My ombuds position is best described as: [N=294]

The sole ombuds serving this organization	44.9%
One of several ombuds who serve this organization	55.1%

Is there a formal policy or Charter or Terms of Reference with standards of practice and ethical principles for the ombuds office or role in this organization? [N=294]

Yes	75.5%
No	21.4%
I don't know	3.1%

To whom does the ombuds office report in your organization? (check all that apply) [N=294]

Board (incl. Board chair or committee)	9.5%
CEO-level (e.g., President, Sec. General)	39.8%
COO-level (e.g., Provost, Executive Vice President)	16.0%
Other very senior leadership position or body	16.7%
A more senior or managing ombuds	16.3%
The head of my local sector/subsidiary/region (who is not a senior or managing ombuds)	1.4%
Other (please describe)	8.2%
A compliance office or officer (e.g., ethics, general counsel, diversity/equity, or human resources)	8.5%

Did you receive a formal performance review in 2021? [N=293]

Yes	56.7%
No	43.3%

In your role as an ombuds, did you conduct a structured self-assessment in 2021? [N=294]

Yes, as part of my formal performance review	34.7%
Yes, for my own awareness and/or development	16.7%
No, I did not conduct a structured self-assessment	48.6%

Employment Sector

In which sector does your organization best fit? [N=294]

Academic (Higher Education, college/university)	53.7%
ADR	0.7%
Consulting firm	0.3%
Corporate	5.8%
Education (i.e., K-12 schools or administration; schools for children or youth)	1.4%
Government	17.0%
Healthcare	2.7%
International/multinational civil service	5.4%
International/multinational organization (non civil service)	4.4%
Nonprofit	3.7%
Other, please specify	3.1%
Quasi-government	1.7%

Academic Sector: Please indicate the best descriptor of your institution. [N=158]

Public college or university	108	68.4%
Private college or university (not faith-based)	32	20.3%
Faith-based private college or university	5	3.2%
Professional school within a college/university (i.e., dedicated to a medical or law school)	5	3.2%
For profit college or university	2	1.3%
Other	6	3.8%

Academic Sector: Please indicate the internal constituencies with whom you are expected to work. (check all that apply) [N=157]

I do not work with internal constituents	0	0.0%
Undergraduate students	98	62.4%
Graduate students	106	67.5%
Professional students (e.g., medical, dental, law)	91	58.0%
Staff	123	78.3%
Academic administrators	119	75.8%
Postdocs/Fellows	93	59.2%
Researchers (nonteaching)	92	58.6%
Faculty/lecturers/instructors	128	81.5%
Contract employees	78	49.7%
Trainees	62	39.5%
Union members	63	40.1%
Other	14	8.9%

Academic Sector: Please indicate the external constituencies with whom you are expected to work. (check all that apply) [N=157]

I do not work with external constituents	67	42.7%
Vendors	34	21.7%
Landlords	18	11.5%
Parents	77	49.0%
Granting agencies	12	7.6%
Government agencies	13	8.3%
Customers or other recipients of services	19	12.1%
Patients	8	5.1%
Other, please describe	14	8.9%
Volunteers	28	17.8%
Donors	21	13.4%
Alumni 16.90% 73	73	46.5%
Community members	48	30.6%

All other (non-academic) sectors: Please indicate the internal constituencies with whom you are expected to work. (check all that apply) [N=129]

I did not work with internal constituents	8	6.2%
An entire company/institution/agency/organization	96	74.4%
A large sector/subsidiary/region of the whole company/institution/agency/organization	18	14.0%
A department or group within the whole organization/company/institution/agency/organization	21	16.3%
Other, please describe	9	7.0%
Union members or representatives	18	14.0%

All other (non-academic) sectors: Please indicate the external constituencies with whom you are expected to work. (N=130)

I did not work with external constituents	65	50.0%
Customers	25	19.2%
Vendors	15	11.5%
Government organizations	26	20.0%
Community-based organizations	19	14.6%
Other, please describe	22	16.9%
Volunteers	17	13.1%
Donors	6	4.6%
Community members	19	14.6%

Constituency, Caseload and Geographics

Mean is the average of all responses; **median** is the middle value of all ordered responses; **interquartile range** represents the middle fifty-percent of all ordered responses (thus excluding the lowest quarter and the highest quarter).

How many individuals comprise your ombuds constituency (that is, have access to your services)?

[N=255*]

Mean	23,286
Median	12,000
Interquartile range	2,500 – 30,000

**Note: Six survey participants indicated they are available to one-million or more constituents; as these few figures would greatly skew the mean average upward, they have been set aside for this chart.*

How many cases did your ombuds office (all ombuds) handle in 2021? [N=247*]

Mean	210
Median	150
Interquartile range	74 – 298

**For consistency, the case figures for the ombuds with over one-million constituents were set aside in preparing this chart. Figures for ombuds reporting partial-year service have been annualized.*

How many systemic reviews did your ombuds office handle in 2021? [N=238*]

Mean	10
Median	3
Interquartile range	1 – 8

**For consistency, the case figures for the ombuds with over one-million constituents were set aside in preparing this chart. Figures for ombuds reporting partial-year service have been annualized.*

To ensure comparable data for the figures above, please indicate the number of months you served as ombuds in 2021 (rounding to nearest month). [N=270]

Up to 3 months	23
4 to 8 months	26
9 to 12 months	221

As measured by ombuds time spent, please estimate what percentage of your cases in 2021...
 [N=271]

... required one hour or less.

Mean	34.2%
Median	25.0%
Interquartile range	10.0% – 54.5%

... required more than one hour but fewer than 100 hours.

Mean	60.2%
Median	70.0%
Interquartile range	37.5% – 85.0%

... required 100 hours or more.

Mean	5.6%
Median	0.0%
Interquartile range	0.0% – 5.0%

As measured by ombuds time spent, please estimate what percentage of your systemic inquiries in 2021... [N=271]

... required one hour or less.

Mean	36.2%
Median	0.0%
Interquartile range	0.0% – 100%

... required more than one hour but fewer than 100 hours.

Mean	53.7%
Median	65.0%
Interquartile range	0.0% – 100%

... required 100 hours or more.

Mean	10.1%
Median	0.0%
Interquartile range	0.0% – 0.0%

Cases and Issues

Compared to previous years, in 2021 did you see more, fewer, or about the same number of cases related to: [N=157-192]

	Fewer	Same	More
Intergenerational	11.5%	63.7%	24.8%
More than three issues in a case	5.7%	52.1%	42.2%
More than one of ethnicity, language, race, religion	6.6%	48.6%	44.8%
Complex gender issues	13.5%	56.5%	30.0%
Cross organization or multi-unit issues	6.9%	48.7%	44.4%
Issues involving multiple/conflicting rules	4.9%	51.1%	44.0%

Compared to previous years, in 2021 did you see more, fewer, or about the same number of cases brought by: [N=147-182]

	Fewer	Same	More
Visitors whose views, interests or concerns challenged your ability to maintain impartially	10.2%	51%	38.8%
Groups as visitors	24.7%	41.8%	33.5%
Groups as other party/parties to a visitor's conflict or concern	14.4%	55.7%	29.9%
Bystanders or third parties	14.2%	62.1%	23.7%
Anonymous visitors	25.3%	56.5%	18.2%

Compared to previous years, in 2021 did you see more, fewer, or about the same number of cases which: [N=167-188]

	Fewer	Same	More
Prompted the ombuds to follow up on issues in the case	4.8%	41.5%	53.7%
Became the impetus for a systemic response in a department	8.8%	51.6%	39.6%
Became the impetus for a systemic response in a division or college	7.8%	54.5%	37.7%
Became the impetus for a systemic response organization-wide	7%	49.4%	43.6%

Compared to previous years, in 2021 I did more, less, or about the same in relation to: [N=62-184]

	Less	Same	More
Conducted training or briefings	17.4%	36.5%	46.1%

Mediated between disputing parties (convened together, whether in person, by phone, or otherwise)	12.7%	48.0%	39.3%
Served as a facilitator of group dialogue or decision-making	13.7%	40.6%	45.7%
Contacted a compliance office within organization for advice (such as HR, legal)	6.2%	60.7%	33.1%
Conducted shuttle diplomacy (facilitated communication or mediated without convening the parties)	8.7%	58.2%	33.2%
Contacted external legal counsel for advice	24.2%	59.7%	16.1%

How often did the ombuds office deal with these issues? [N=226-229]

	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
Disrespectful treatment or exclusion based on distrust, contempt or polarization (political, ideological)	45.7%	45.2%	9.1%
Disrespectful treatment or exclusion based on other reasons	56.3%	40.7%	3.0%
Harassment, bullying or abuse related to the recipient's social identity(ies)	29.9%	54.5%	15.6%
Harassment, bullying or abuse apparently unrelated to the recipient's social identity(ies)	38.5%	51.5%	10.0%
Deliberate interference with others' work (e.g., sabotage)	10.0%	52.4%	37.7%
Retaliation	28.8%	56.3%	14.8%
Benefits	19.0%	54.9%	25.1%
Performance evaluation or Grading	51.3%	33.0%	15.7%
Promotion/demotion or transfer	30.7%	48.2%	21.1%
Workload or overload unrelated to COVID	38.3%	40.5%	21.1%
Flexibility in work arrangement (e.g., remote, telework) related to COVID	46.9%	33.8%	19.3%
Return-to-workplace (or return-to-classrooms) policies related to COVID	50.2%	30.4%	19.4%
Work/life imbalance related to COVID	45.4%	34.8%	19.8%
Layoffs/reorganization/firings	13.7%	51.5%	34.8%
Suggestions for improvement	22.9%	59.9%	17.2%
Leader, manager or supervisor decisions or actions	62.1%	30%	7.9%
Interim/replacement leadership appointments	20.3%	44.5%	35.2%
Safety concerns (incl. fear) related to COVID	38.0%	45.9%	16.2%
Safety concerns (incl. fear) unrelated to COVID	14.8%	55.9%	29.3%

Concerns about suicide (by visitor or others)	4.8%	39.0%	56.1%
Concerns about homicide (by visitor or others)	3.5%	7.0%	89.4%
Whistleblowing	8.7%	57.2%	34.1%
Waste/fraud/abuse	7.0%	52.8%	40.2%
Scientific/academic research misconduct	9.3%	39.2%	51.5%
National security	4.4%	9.3%	86.3%
Insider threat	4.8%	15.4%	79.7%
Gross negligence	4.9%	28.8%	66.4%
Ethics	21.1%	67.1%	11.8%
Excellence/rigor	14.1%	51.1%	34.8%
Financial misconduct	4.0%	42.0%	54.0%
Intellectual property/non-compete	5.8%	29.6%	64.6%

Please think of last year's most serious cases (by your judgment). Of the five most serious, did any of those five involve the following issues? [N=188]

Leader/manager/supervisor decisions or actions	83.7%
Other forms of disrespect	83.5%
Retaliation	76.9%
Harassment unrelated to identity	76.5%
Disrespect distrust, contempt, polarization	69.4%
Harassment related to identity	66.9%
Performance evaluations/grades	66.6%
Suicide concerns	65.7%
Ethics	65.4%
Safety related to Covid	62.4%
Flexibility in work arrangement related to Covid	60.5%
Return to work/school related to Covid	58.9%
Workload unrelated to Covid	57.8%
Promotion/demotion/transfer	57.5%
Suggestions for organizational improvement	56.3%
Work/life balance related to Covid	56.0%
Layoffs, reorganization, firings	55.1%
Scientific/academic research misconduct	54.8%
Deliberate interference with others' work/sabotage	50.0%
Whistleblowing	49.6%
Financial misconduct	49.3%
Interim/replacement appointments	47.3%
Safety unrelated to Covid	45.1%
Gross negligence	43.1%
Excellence, integrity, and rigor in analytic thinking or work practice	43.0%

Benefits	42.9%
Waste/fraud/abuse	41.7%
Intellectual property/non-compete	34.4%
Insider threat	29.7%
National security	25.0%
Homicide concerns	23.8%

Of those five (or fewer) most serious cases, from whom did you learn of them? [N=210]

Recipient/target of behaviors	96.2%
Supervisor	34.8%
Peer/bystander	34.4%
Senior officer	16.7%
HR	16.2%
Perpetrator	7.6%
Someone outside of my organization	5.7%
Counseling	5.2%
Health care practitioner	2.4%
EAP	1.0%
Security/police	1.0%
Other	4.3%

In those five (or fewer) most serious cases, if you believed information needed to reach appropriate offices/authorities, what actions did you take? (check up to five) [N=214]

Helped the visitor find some other way to get the information where it needed to go	76.2%
Received permission to convey the information (without identifying the source)	74.8%
Received permission to convey the information (identifying the source)	64.0%
Found another way for the information to get where it needed to go	38.8%
Found an effective way for manager or compliance office to find the information itself	24.8%
Breached confidentiality (because you perceived an imminent risk)	9.3%
Breached confidentiality (because your organization requires the ombuds to report this issue)	4.2%
Did something else	5.1%

Policies and Standards

The following questions concern policies around voluntariness and specific individuals. [N=222]

Is working with the ombudsman voluntary for the complainant (or visitor, inquirer, initiator)?

Yes, always	93.7%
In some matters, not all	2.3%
No, never	4.1%

Is working with the ombudsman voluntary for the responder?

Yes, always	87.8%
In some matters, not all	8.6%
No, never	3.6%

Will you listen to an anonymous caller?

Yes, always	83.0%
In some matters, not all	12.6%
No, never	4.5%

Will you listen to third parties, including bystanders?

Yes, always	78.5%
In some matters, not all	18.4%
No, never	3.1%

Are your ombuds services available to union members?

Yes	37.7%
Yes, only for issues not addressed by contract	19.7%
No	5.8%
Not applicable	36.8%

Services and Accomplishments

How often, if at all, do you provide the following services?

Working to be seen as fair, safe, accessible, credible [N=214]

	Always	Frequently	Rarely	Never
Delivering respect with attention to the feelings of visitors	87.9%	10.7%	-	1.4%
Providing an “opportunity to be heard”	95.3%	4.2%	0.5%	-
Providing and explaining pertinent information or policies	65.4%	30.8%	3.3%	0.5%
Listening	76.6%	21.5%	1.9%	-
Reframing issues and developing increased awareness of others’ perspectives	71.5%	26.6%	1.9%	-
Being alert to urgent issues and the possibility of an emergency	71%	23.4%	5.1%	0.5%
Helping to develop and evaluate appropriate options	80.4%	18.7%	0.5%	0.5%
Monitoring the accessibility of the ombuds office to diverse constituents	52.3%	34.1%	11.7%	1.9%
Monitoring response time	60.3%	29%	7.5%	3.3%
Monitoring time from start to close of case	40.7%	30.4%	19.2%	9.8%

Helping people help themselves [N=213]

	Always	Frequently	Rarely	Never
Offering the option of referrals to other resources	49.3%	46.9%	2.8%	0.9%
Helping visitors to collect, organize and understand information	49.3%	44.6%	6.1%	-
Helping visitors to use a direct approach (e.g., with coaching and role-playing)	37.6%	58.2%	4.2%	-

Informal intervention [N=213]

	Always	Frequently	Rarely	Never
Working with leaders so they may be seen as approachable and fair	11.7%	54.9%	27.7%	5.6%
Offering shuttle diplomacy (facilitating communication without bringing all parties together)	16%	51.9%	27.4%	4.7%
Offering mediation or coordinating internal mediators	12.7%	45.5%	33.3%	8.5%
Exploring/looking into a problem informally	18.3%	53.6%	26.3%	2.8%

Facilitating a generic approach to an individual problem to lead to a fair outcome while protecting the identity of the individual	21.7%	52.8%	22.6%	2.8%
Assisting with process issues involved in an appeals process	7.5%	28.2%	38%	26.3%
Following up on a specific case with relevant stakeholders	16.0%	44.1%	35.7%	4.2%

Working within the organization [N=213]

	Always	Frequently	Rarely	Never
Providing early warning of new or emerging issues	18.0%	61.6%	18.5%	1.9%
Keeping non-identifying notes and statistics	69.5%	23.5%	5.2%	1.9%
Identifying and communicating about patterns of issues and their root causes	35.2%	55.4%	8.5%	0.9%
Providing training and briefings about policies and processes	13.1%	32.9%	33.3%	20.7%
Convening relevant stakeholders to address emerging or ongoing issues	8.5%	32.9%	46.9%	11.7%
Meeting confidentially with individuals or groups to prepare an oral report or presentation to involved parties	8.0%	25.5%	44.8%	21.7%
Facilitating meetings for senior leaders	6.6%	18.8%	46.5%	28.2%
Working for specific systems change (e.g. recommending new policies, procedures, and structures)	6.1%	35.4%	49.1%	9.4%
Serving as a non-voting resource person for policy committees	7.1%	20.3%	33.5%	39.2%
Helping managers to work with issues related to diversity	10.4%	41.0%	32.1%	16.5%
Supporting assessments of culture/climate	17.4%	48.4%	22.5%	11.7%
Working to support specific, mission-related, organizational initiatives	9.4%	42.5%	34.0%	14.2%
Following up on system change recommendations that you have made	11.3%	40.8%	29.6%	18.3%
Helping informally to coordinate organizational resources or offices related to conflict management	10.3%	44.1%	28.2%	17.4%
Working informally to influence legislation and regulations	2.3%	12.2%	32.9%	52.6%

Other functions [N=213]

	Always	Frequently	Rarely	Never
Participating as a voting member on committees	-	1.9%	9.4%	88.7%
Keeping records for compliance purposes	4.2%	5.2%	11.3%	79.3%
Keeping records for an office records schedule (e.g., for the National Archives and Records Administration)	3.3%	4.2%	4.7%	87.7%
Writing formal investigatory reports for the purpose of decision-making by managers	1.4%	4.7%	3.8%	90.1%
Issue formal recommendations for specific action	1.4%	7.5%	16.4%	74.6%
Acting as advocate or witness in a formal adjudicatory process	-	1.4%	2.8%	95.8%
Accompanying a party in a formal adjudicatory process	-	2.3%	4.7%	93%
Dealing with formal appeals	1.4%	1.9%	6.6%	90.1%
Acting as an arbitrator or judge	-	0.9%	0.9%	98.1%

The work of an ombuds can lead to individual and systemic changes. In 2021, has the work of the ombuds office resulted in any of the following systemic changes (at least one time)? [N=208]

Identified a significant "new issue" for the organization	87.5%
An individual received fair and equitable process in a serious matter when they otherwise would not have	86.5%
Fostered an important "bridge" between colleagues, units or agencies	86.5%
Significant improvement in morale in work unit	80.3%
Contributed significantly to increase attention to diversity/equity/inclusion/belonging	76.4%
Change in a procedure	75.6%
Significant reduction of reputational risk for the organization or individuals from settling a serious dispute	75.5%
Provided training and briefings to prevent specific problems for constituents	71.2%
Fostered demonstrable improvement in excellence, integrity, and rigor in analytic thinking and work practice	68.6%
Change in a policy	62.8%
Significant cost savings from effective safe handling of an "early warning" or whistleblowing	62.4%
Significant cost savings from reduction in FOIA/EEO/other formal complaints or suits	61.5%
Other	56.5%
Change in an organizational structure	42.4%
High probability of having helped to save a life	37.0%