

Some Organizational Ombuds (OO) Functions AI Cannot Do—or Do as Well—as OOs

And Difficulties AI Would Have in Complying with the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice

As seen by AI, 2026 with assistance from Mary Rowe

Relationship-building and trust over time

Theme	Specific action	Why AI can't do this well
Relationship-building and trust	Get to know the members and missions of the organization's conflict management system professionals—build relationships—before conflicts (and good ideas) come in the door.	Requires embodied presence, informal contact, and a stable personal reputation within a specific organizational culture.
Relationship-building and trust	Build trusting relationships over months or years, where leadership, visitors and responders come back because of the ombuds' demonstrated integrity, discretion, and courage in past cases.	Trust depends on visible human choices over time, not on a replaceable, opaque tool whose behavior is set elsewhere.
Relationship-building and trust	Serve as a symbolic "safe harbor"—a known, embodied person whose office people come to when they are scared—which may shape whether concerns and ideas surface at all.	Psychological safety is grounded in human presence, character, and institutional memory, not in software.
Relationship-building and trust	Follow up, with permission and prior agreement, with visitors, alleged offenders, and responders after a case, where relevant.	Sensitive follow-up needs nuanced timing, judgment about readiness, and remembered relationships across many contexts.
Relationship-building and trust	Repair trust after a mistake—acknowledging an ombuds misstep, apologizing, and demonstrating through later actions that learning and accountability are real.	Genuine apology and demonstrated change require moral agency and personal responsibility, which AI lacks.

One-on-one listening, coaching, and support

Theme	Specific action	Why AI can't do this well
One-on-one support	Sit in a room with a frightened or angry visitor, notice their body language and tone, and pace the conversation moment-by-moment to help them calm down and feel safe.	AI cannot read full nonverbal signals or adjust pace and presence with the embodied subtlety of a human.
One-on-one support	Offer “just-in-time” conflict coaching that is tailored to a visitor’s status, role, personality, culture, and concerns about risk, adjusting in real time as the visitor reacts.	Tailoring high-stakes conversations demands deep contextual knowledge, intuition, and live emotional attunement.
One-on-one support	Sense when a concern is really about identity, dignity, or moral injury, and reframe the conversation upward from narrow policy language toward values and meaning.	Recognizing and naming moral injury draws on a human’s lived experience and value judgments — beyond pattern-matching.
One-on-one support	Quietly reality-test a visitor’s plan (“What might your X or Y say?”), choosing the right mix of challenge and support so the visitor can hear difficult feedback.	Balancing challenge and support calls for nuanced empathy and risk-sensing, not just generic advice patterns.
One-on-one support	Use silence, small acknowledgments, and empathic reflections to help someone disclose sensitive experiences such as abuse, betrayal, anxiety, or retaliation.	Skillful use of silence and micro-cues depends on shared human experience and moment-to-moment interpersonal judgment.
One-on-one support	Notice when a visitor might really need therapy, legal advice, or emergency services, and make a careful, face-saving referral that preserves their dignity and safety.	Safe triage and referral involve reading distress, stigma, and local options in ways AI cannot reliably manage.
One-on-one support	Call a resource in real time during a session with the visitor.	Co-managing a live three-way interaction and translating it for a distressed person is a complex relational task.

Group work, facilitation, and shuttle diplomacy

Theme	Specific action	Why AI can't do this well
Groups & facilitation	Work with groups, such as visitors and alleged offenders—and responders.	Group facilitation requires reading multiple people at once and flexibly balancing their needs in real time.
Groups & facilitation	Conduct nuanced shuttle diplomacy between people who will not sit in the same room, modulating tone and framing appropriately for each side without breaking trust.	Shuttle diplomacy depends on a human's credibility, intuition about what each side can hear, and careful tone control.
Groups & facilitation	Convene and facilitate a delicate in-person or virtual conversation where emotions are high, changing the structure on the fly when the process starts to go off the rails.	Redesigning a process effectively, in the moment, requires improvisation to deal with emotional pressures that AI cannot reliably match.
Groups & facilitation	Interpret and respond to nonverbal group dynamics in facilitated sessions (who sits where, who never speaks, who everyone looks at) and adjust participation to prevent domination or silencing.	AI cannot adequately perceive physical arrangements, micro-alliances, silence and tacit signals—in a live room or on Zoom.
Groups & facilitation	Accept invitations from committees, affinity groups and work groups to observe and engage in Q and A.	Being invited and effective depends on personal standing, relational history, and adaptive speaking.
Groups & facilitation	Accept invitations to facilitate or observe meetings ad hoc or regularly.	Trusted facilitation in sensitive meetings rests on a human's perceived neutrality and judgment.
Groups & facilitation	Offer talking circles or other vital specialty skills.	Healing-oriented circle work is built on shared human vulnerability, trust, and ritualized presence.
Groups & facilitation	Offer Q and A presentations for groups about conflict management skills, offering role-playing and onsite participant commentary; get to be known for sessions about the specialty skills you have.	Live teaching with role-plays involves reading the room, humor, and improvisation with participant reactions. Experience with varied role-playing is the best communication about role-playing.
Groups & facilitation	Consult ad hoc with affinity groups about their projects. Be attentive to their good ideas for them and for the organization.	Effective consultation depends on understanding group identity, history, and internal dynamics that AI cannot fully grasp.

Case handling, complexity, and ethical judgment

Theme	Specific action	Why AI can't do this well
Cases & ethics	Deal with “multi-multi” cases: multiple visitors or multiple alleged offenders, or multiple responders, about multiple issues requiring multiple skills, or in multiple units, or engaging multiple rules and norms and laws, in many time periods—or all of these.	Complex multi-party, multi-system work requires holistic, value-laden judgment, and dealing with multiple emotions—beyond rule-based logic.
Cases & ethics	Continuously review a case for possible risks and benefits for the visitor, the organization, and others—and adjust accordingly in real time.	Ongoing, relational risk-balancing depends on tacit knowledge, and evolving trust, with multiple actors.
Cases & ethics	Decide, in a puzzling case, whether to keep working informally, keep offering formal channels, or to explore a creative third path that does not yet exist on paper.	Creating and choosing among novel paths is an imaginative, ethical act, not just a database lookup.
Cases & ethics	Exercise personal ethical judgment about when confidentiality must yield to serious risk of harm—and then take personal responsibility for how that escalation is done.	AI cannot bear personal responsibility or weigh conflicting duties in a morally accountable way.
Cases & ethics	Be alert to emergencies; take appropriate immediate action in emergencies, and appropriate immediate action with multiple leaders and responders when relevant; provide immediate assistance in emergent situations; act as a neutral observer on request.	Emergency decision-making and action, across systems, requires fast, embodied coordination, moral courage, and local savvy.
Cases & ethics	Provide appropriate bits of “check-and-balance,” and “failsafe,” and “backup” for leaders in urgent situations.	Acting as a human check on power presumes independence, courage, and situational awareness AI does not possess. Failsafe and backup require presence.
Cases & ethics	Hold confidences under pressure and navigate those pressures without betraying visitors or becoming adversarial.	Withstanding pressure depends on a person's character, resolve, and professional ethics, not on code.

Systems navigation, customization, and collaboration

Theme	Specific action	Why AI can't do this well
Systems & collaboration	Get to know the members and missions of the organization's conflict management system professionals—build relationships—before conflicts and good ideas come in the door. Learn how they define risks and benefits.	System-level collaboration relies on long-term human networking and mutual confidence.
Systems & collaboration	Negotiate process-customizations with all formal compliance offices so that a case or parts of a case might move forward, without snags, loss of privacy, or re-traumatizing the people involved. Agree on how you will communicate with them.	Negotiating collaborative processes requires interpersonal negotiation, trust, and knowledge of personalities and politics.
Systems & collaboration	Consult with leaders and colleagues, discuss the concept of Most Serious Cases , and communicate regularly so they understand the options you regularly use when you determine that management needs information about a case.	Creating and calibrating shared "seriousness" standards is an inherently human, normative exercise.
Systems & collaboration	Continuously learn, from people other than visitors in the organization, about the facts of various situations and concerns and good ideas that abound in the organization.	Informal fact-finding via conversations and observation is not something AI can perform autonomously in a workplace.
Systems & collaboration	Continuously learn about how the organization works—and changes over time—so that you can sometimes come up with elegant, customized options, and effective sequences of options.	Deep organizational learning involves lived experience of culture, history, and informal norms.

Pattern recognition, data, and systemic feedback

Theme	Specific action	Why AI can't do this well
Patterns & feedback	Walk the halls, attend meetings, and listen informally for “weak signals” of systemic risks or problems that are not yet formal complaints, or good ideas that do not yet have traction.	Embodied presence in everyday spaces gives humans access to subtle signals AI cannot directly perceive.
Patterns & feedback	Use your central position—with all constituents in all roles—to be alert to new issues or bits of issues, to detect patterns early; be ready to react to one high-risk data point and get it, as appropriate, to leadership when necessary.	Deciding when “one data point” is enough to act involves contextual, ethical, and political judgment.
Patterns & feedback	Count the issues you have per case and track where or why multi-multi cases appear; look for any “sentinel” issue that accompanies other issues or inspires the reporting of Most Serious Cases.	Interpreting counts and “sentinel” issues in context requires human sense-making and narrative understanding.
Patterns & feedback	Synthesize operationally useful themes from confidential cases into a short, politically astute message senior leaders can hear—without exposing any personal identities.	Crafting safe, persuasive messaging to power is an art of language, timing, courtesy and relationship.
Patterns & feedback	Choose the right moment, messenger(s) or leader(s) to raise a systemic concern in <i>operationally useful</i> terms so it will be taken seriously rather than dismissed as blame or noise.	Judging timing and messenger depends on tacit knowledge of personalities, agendas, and institutional cycles.
Patterns & feedback	Follow up on your systems reviews and recommendations and sometimes those of others. Be familiar with and build on past reports and expertise in the organization, as appropriate to current events.	Effective follow-up requires historical knowledge, persistence, relational leverage, and understanding of shifting priorities.
Patterns & feedback	Share with management things that are going well: issues resolved, good news coming or a good idea that is relevant to them, and apparent upswings in morale.	Calibrated positive feedback depends on human perception of what will be credible and welcome.
Patterns & feedback	Confidentially seek information and wisdom from experts inside and outside the organization and do bits of reconnaissance that will be helpful with cases and to leadership.	Knowing whom to ask and how to frame confidential questions is a relational, not purely technical, skill.
Patterns & feedback	Act on your own initiative if you notice something askew or risky, especially if it pertains to safety or the organizational mission. Always be prepared for an emergency.	Initiative and moral courage and emergent situations cannot be delegated to a system that lacks competence, agency, or values.

Knowledge building, communication, and idea stewardship

Theme	Specific action	Why AI can't do this well
Knowledge & ideas	Build over time a list of options and ideas that work in your organization, possibly to use as examples if the success was public or, in the aggregate, to reassure a visitor—and, in reverse, remember ideas and options that did not work. Learn continuously from other ombuds' experience.	Knowing what “works,” locally and professionally, blends data with lived experience, stories, and informal feedback loops.
Knowledge & ideas	Learn continuously from the writing and presentations of others. Share what you learn; write and collect one-pagers for your website and presentation handouts, and handouts in the office.	Translating complex, sensitive practice into accessible, context-appropriate materials remains a human craft.
Knowledge & ideas	Teach and exemplify conflict-management skills informally—on the phone, in the hallway, in a brief consultation—using stories and examples that fit the organization's culture.	Opportunistic teaching relies on human timing, rapport, and relevant narrative memory.
Knowledge & ideas	Ask permission—of visitor(s) who suggest(s) a good new idea for the organization or its members—to share the idea and help visitors learn how to get credit for good ideas.	Stewarding ideas ethically requires sensitivity to recognition, power, risks and reward for the those who proposed them.

Independence, reputation, and role-shifting

Theme	Specific action	Why AI can't do this well
Independence & roles	Build and maintain a reputation for independence and impartiality in a specific organization—through choices about office location, reporting lines, and day-to-day behavior—that makes people believe the ombuds is not “on anyone's side.”	Independence is a social judgment about a person's conduct over time, not a property of a “tool “owned by the institution.
Independence & roles	Integrate multiple professional roles in a case when appropriate (listener, coach, mediator, researcher, role-player, systemic observer) and consciously shift hats while signaling those shifts to the visitor.	Role-shifting requires self-awareness, transparency, and nuanced communication about boundaries that AI cannot fully mirror.

Some Difficulties an AI Bot Would Have Complying with IOA Standards of Practice As Seen by AI (2026)

The International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice for organizational ombuds involve four key elements: independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality. Here's a look at some of the challenges AI would face in adhering to these standards.

I. Independence

AI-specific difficulties

- 1. Dependence on infrastructure and owners**
 - An AI system runs on servers owned by an organization or vendor.
 - System owners can change models, prompts, logging, or access rules at any time.
 - This undermines both actual and perceived independence: the AI is structurally tied to those who control its environment.
- 2. Hidden control via configuration**
 - Subtle changes to system prompts (“avoid recommending X,” “steer away from criticizing leadership”) can bias output.
 - Unlike a human ombuds, the AI can't avoid, refuse, or blow the whistle against such hidden constraints.
- 3. Perception of independence**
 - Users may see the AI as “a company tool,” even if policies say otherwise.
 - It's harder to build personal trust and a reputation for independence without a visible, autonomous person behind the role whom you can “get to know.”
- 4. No autonomous professional judgment about role boundaries**
 - A human ombuds can push back if asked to do non-ombuds tasks (e.g., investigations, reporting).
 - An AI can't negotiate its mandate or say “this request violates my standards” unless pre-programmed to do so—and, even then, AI can be overridden.

II. Neutrality/Impartiality/Nonalignment

AI-specific difficulties

- 1. Training-data and design bias**
 - The model's behavior reflects patterns from training data and system design, which may encode cultural, institutional, or legal biases.
 - AI training can tilt responses toward management, prevailing norms, or majority groups, even when the system is “told” to be neutral.
- 2. Dependence on input framing**
 - AI is highly sensitive to how a question is worded.

- First-contact narratives may prime the model to sympathize with one side, without the AI proactively correcting for “one-sided stories” or more facts as a skilled ombuds might.
3. **Limited contextual and relational understanding**
 - Human ombuds notice power dynamics, subtle intimidation, historical patterns, and emotions in the room.
 - AI has no lived experience, body language reading, or institutional memory in the same personal way, so it may apply abstract “balance” in ways that are or feel unfair or tone-deaf.
 4. **Conflict of interest is opaque and untestable**
 - A human can disclose prior involvement with parties or matters and recuse.
 - An AI cannot reliably track “prior relationships” in a meaningful, human sense, and its creators may also have interests in outcomes that the AI cannot recognize or disclose.
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III. Confidentiality

AI-specific difficulties

1. **Technical logging and data flows**
 - AI systems typically log prompts and outputs for monitoring, debugging, or abuse detection.
 - Even if policy says, “no one reads them,” the existence of logs, backups, and multiple technical actors makes strong ombuds-level confidentiality harder to guarantee.
 2. **Multiple actors behind the scenes**
 - Engineers, administrators, and vendors may have various levels of system access.
 - There may be multiple online connections that are vulnerable to hacking, theft, etc.
 - A human ombuds can personally control their notes; an AI’s “notes” are distributed across infrastructure the AI doesn’t control.
 3. **Difficulty making and enforcing promises**
 - Human ombuds can precisely explain limits to confidentiality and personally commit to professional standards.
 - AI can only restate what it was told to say; it cannot verify or enforce what the infrastructure will do with data.
 4. **Managing exceptions to confidentiality (imminent harm)**
 - Assessing “imminent risk of serious harm” requires nuanced, context-heavy judgment and follow-through (e.g., deciding whom to notify, how to minimize breach of confidence).
 - An AI cannot independently verify facts, judge risk in human terms, or coordinate safe, minimal disclosures; it would rely entirely on pre-written rules and external handlers.
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IV. Informality

AI-specific difficulties

1. **Blurred boundary with formal systems**
 - Digital tools are easy to integrate with case management, HR systems, or compliance workflows.
 - There is a constant temptation to treat AI ombuds logs as “data” for formal processes, eroding informality.
2. **Users’ expectations of digital records**
 - People should assume that anything typed into a digital system might be stored, discoverable, hackable or auditable.
 - That perception by itself undermines the sense of informality, even if the design tries to separate the AI from formal processes.
3. **Inability to resist/refuse formal roles**
 - A human ombuds can insist: “I do not testify or make findings in formal processes.”
 - An AI cannot autonomously refuse being repurposed (e.g., being asked to summarize complaints for legal, generate investigative leads, or produce “evidence-like” transcripts).
4. **Limited capacity for creative, relational problem solving**
 - Informal ombuds work often involves shuttle diplomacy, coaching people through delicate conversations, reading emotional readiness, timing interventions.
 - An AI can suggest options, but can’t engage real-time with multiple stakeholders, sense relational cues, or negotiate subtle, trust-based steps that make informality effective.

Note: AI may display incomplete, inaccurate or offensive information.

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