

How to Collect and Communicate Operationally Useful Data about the Value

of “Just Having an Ombuds Office” & of Ombuds Functions & Ombuds Skills

(with a short comparison, at the end, of human ombuds with AI and “ombudsbots”)

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An Organizational Ombuds Office can help both its visitors and organizational systems function more happily, at lower cost, with added benefits and greater efficiency. The very existence of the office helps—and organizational ombuds (OOs) add value with distinctive functions and skills.

This article presents 26 sources of ombuds value and effectiveness, including three brief sections, at the end, on “specifically *human* value” that OOs offer, in the age of AI, by comparison with “ombudsbots.”

At the end of the article, there are nine questions to help ombuds to think about how we can collect and communicate operationally useful data about these 26 sources of value and effectiveness.

Each source of value here can be tracked—for metrics—and/or communicated—through one or more of the methods listed in the nine questions.

26 Sources of Ombuds Value and Effectiveness

1. **Voice and workplace climate**

The existence of an Ombuds Office is a signal that the organization supports the concept of *voice* for individuals, through listening to concerns and good ideas from all constituents. Ombuds contribute to recruitment, retention, and morale by providing a hearing for the voice of each visitor. That the ombuds *listens and exemplifies listening* to each constituent—even with difficult superstars—can add value across the organization.

2. **Fair process**

An Ombuds Office is a signal, by its very existence, that the organization respects fair processes. Ombuds model procedural and interactional fairness in every interaction, which can increase trust in other channels.

3. **Safety, accessibility, credibility, fairness, and choice¹**

Ombuds that practice to the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice seek to provide a zero-barrier (safe, accessible, fair, and credible) ombuds office. Ombuds help to develop options and a *choice of options for visitors, in alignment with research on the inherent value, to constituents, of choice and control*. OOs therefore will hear concerns and good ideas that might not be brought to any other office or manager. This point is especially important for organizations that have strong “zero tolerance” policies, since one of the shortcomings of such policies is that some people

¹ [“Options and Choice for Conflict Resolution in the Workplace.”](#) Rowe, Mary P. In *Negotiation Strategies for Mutual Gain: The Basic Seminar of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School*, edited by Lavinia Hall, 105-119. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1993.

are afraid of bad outcomes from speaking up.²

4. Communicating information

An Ombuds Office provides and receives needed information, to and from visitors. This function includes a wide variety of information about rules, laws and norms, and how the organization works. It includes safety-critical, ethics-related, productivity-related, and morale-related concerns and ideas.

5. Risk mitigation of several types of risk—and early warning/alerts

An Ombuds Office helps visitors deal safely with the risks they face in speaking up. Mitigating the risks faced by visitors in turn can help the organization to manage its own risks. Ombuds can almost always find ways³—that are consonant with very strict protection of visitor identity and the IOA Standards of Practice—to surface needed information to management. *A grossly underestimated aspect of risk mitigation, where ombuds excel, is to help the organization pick up quickly on good ideas instead of “missing out.”*

6. Time to listen and discern⁴

Ombuds focus on having time to listen and are usually able to *give concerns the time that they need*. OOs can help the organization to save on costs by helping to sort out concerns for which managers (and co-workers and fellow students) may not have time; ombuds are often efficient and effective at discernment.

7. Listening to constituents from every role and status

An Ombuds Office listens to all roles in the organization, including, for example, bystanders, bystanders of bystanders, groups, anonymous callers, accused persons, and self-described wrongdoers. With anonymous callers, an ombuds can sometimes listen at length and learn more information than a hotline. Bystanders, and the bystanders of bystanders, are often the first—and occasionally the most important—source of information about Most Serious Cases⁵. From accused persons and self-described wrongdoers, ombuds are sometimes the only intra-organizational resource to have a chance to affirm the organization’s commitment to fairness. And ombuds are sometimes the only resource to be able to learn information that is important to organizational risk management.

8. Enterprise-wide reach: for new issues, good ideas, and pattern detection

An Ombuds Office may be the only office in the organization that can hear any work-related issue, from all persons, in all ranks and roles, from all affinity groups, in all units in their designated constituency. Working throughout the organization sometimes helps the ombuds identify new issues and patterns quickly, to the benefit of all constituents, including the organization. The office may hear concerns early on, in ways that prevent further damage, and may hear half-baked but excellent ideas early on and

² Rowe, M. P., & Bendersky, C. (2003). Workplace justice, zero tolerance, and zero barriers: Getting people to come forward in conflict management systems. In T. A. Kochan & D. B. Lipsky (Eds.), *Negotiations and change: From the workplace to society* (pp. 117–136). Cornell University Press. <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/156456>.

³ For ways ombuds surface information while shielding the source of the information, see ["The Most Serious Cases Reported by Organizational Ombuds: Data From Surveys and Interviews."](#) Rowe, Mary, Timothy Hedeem, Jennifer Schneider, and Hector Escalante. Working paper, December 2024.

⁴ For a deeper understanding of discernment, see Floyd, S., Jouravlev, O., Poliak, M., Mineroff, Z., Gibson, E., & Fedorenko, E. (2025). Three distinct components of pragmatic language use: Social conventions, intonation, and world knowledge–based causal reasoning. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 122(50), e2424400122. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2424400122>

⁵ See <https://mitmgmfaculty.mit.edu/mrowe/bystanders/> for bystander articles on Mary Rowe’s website that illuminate these points.

help in their development.

9. Upward feedback, escalation when appropriate, efficient in emergencies

Ombuds can provide upward feedback, consistent with International Ombuds Association Standards of Practice, efficiently and effectively to all levels of supervision and management. An Ombuds can be very efficient when matters are emergent; *organizational ombuds can call leadership and all relevant managers instantly.*

10. Confidential, independent, informal and impartial third-party processes

An Ombuds provides impartial and confidential shuttle diplomacy, facilitation, coaching and mediation. A full-time ombuds may consult to visitors of every rank nearly daily—and is often a catalyst in helping to resolve thorny issues. These informal processes allow parties to develop and explore options, and repair relationships, without the rigidity or visibility of formal procedures. Some OOs function as facilitators for an informal standing committee that does not keep records or recordings, or for ad hoc meetings where the organization requires a neutral convenor⁶.

11. Strengthening the conflict management system (CMS)

An Ombuds provides a portfolio of informal conflict-management functions and offers relevant formal options to constituents, thus providing multiple options to visitors while strengthening the organization's CMS. An Ombuds frequently discusses formal channels in depth with visitors. And the OO can provide informal design input for the CMS, including gap analysis, mapping options chosen by visitors, and informal recommendations that can make the CMS more coherent and user-friendly.

12. Leadership coaching and decision quality

An Ombuds Office strengthens leadership capability by serving as a confidential thought partner and coach to supervisors, helping them analyze conflicts, practice difficult conversations, and improve people-management skills. The office can improve decision quality at senior levels by integrating qualitative, cross-cutting data patterns and “weak signals” into strategy discussions and governance deliberations.

13. Building conflict competence across the system

Ombuds service enhances conflict competence across the organization through facilitation, shuttle-diplomacy, mediation⁷, coaching, role-playing, skills-building, and modeling interest-based problem solving, which over time can reduce conflict costs and increase collaboration. These common services address individual issues at hand on a daily basis, *and* they also build conflict competence. Repeated exposure to ombuds-style analysis—discerning interests, clarifying issues, and helping to develop options—can improve employees' and managers' problem-solving, communication, and relationship-management skills beyond the specific cases presented.

14. Generic options⁸ (and support for organizational systems)

An Ombuds Office can offer generic options for serious concerns in ways that shield the identity of a visitor, if that is requested by a visitor. Generic options are an organizational-systems approach that strengthens the organization's CMS and operating

⁶ Ombuds—in agreeing to facilitate when asked—may need an agreement that they will never be asked for information about the meeting.

⁷ See also a separate section in the Resource Repository that discusses many different aspects of the value of mediation services.

⁸ “[Consider Generic Options When Complainants and Bystanders Are Fearful.](#)” Rowe, Mary. *Journal of the International Ombuds Association* Vol. 16, No. 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024).

systems while addressing specific concerns on a completely confidential basis. Some generic options result in major benefits for the organization and visitors.

15. Lowest-level, self-managed resolution

Ombuds frequently help to see concerns and good ideas addressed at the lowest possible level—for example, by visitors on their own. Sometimes this also means that a visitor will learn how to prevent difficulties and to mitigate and manage difficulties in the future; in such cases, ombuds have taught the visitors “how to fish, as well as helping them get a fish.”

16. Relationships and organizational intelligence

Working throughout the organization helps the ombuds build relationships with managers, group leaders, and affinity groups. An ombuds can help leadership understand how different units, ranks, and roles will be enthusiastic—or concerned—about organization-wide proposals or changes.

17. Handling complex “multi-multi” issues

An Ombuds Office can deal with multi-generational, multi-issue, multi-person, multi-unit issues that arise under multiple rules and norms and can support multiple managerial decision-makers and affinity groups in discerning solutions for complex situations. Working with these “multi-multi” situations may be easier for an Ombuds Office than for offices that (appropriately) focus only on specific issues or specific cohorts in the organization.

18. Addressing costly, “ill-fitting” concerns

An Ombuds Office can deal informally with costly concerns that do not easily fit into the purview of compliance offices, such as serious misunderstandings or personal matters that might cause a top performer to quit. Some of these concerns—like top talent retention—significantly affect costs and benefits for all constituents, including the organization.

19. Systemic reviews and learning over time

An Ombuds has wide access to data, prior studies, and reports. OOs can do systemic reviews, including informal reviews (consistent with Standards of Practice) for leadership, and can often help deal with concerns that keep popping up in different ways over time.

20. Talking circles, various trainings and many ombuds-specific services

An Ombuds Office can offer talking circles in times of stress, grief, and polarization. An Ombuds Office often offers trainings for various cohorts and affinity groups—and on specific topics on request—including active listening, training managers how to listen to bystanders, team communication, dealing with loss, dealing with neurodiversity, offering a sense of joy, preparation for performance reviews, and colleague-to colleague collaboration skills. Some ombuds have specific skills or expertise with specific cohorts in the organization.

21. Rumor management

An Ombuds Office can sometimes pick up on ill-founded rumors and find options for preventing or dealing with such rumors. By quietly checking facts, clarifying misunderstandings, and offering correct facts and relevant coaching, the office can reduce harm and costs caused by misinformation.

22. Compliance and external scrutiny

The existence of an Ombuds Office may help to protect an organization under the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines or similar laws in other jurisdictions and countries, at a time of government inquiry, as an indication of commitment to following the law. The office's documented role in fostering lawful, ethical behavior can be part of a broader demonstration of organizational due diligence.

23. Probable cost-per-case savings for the organization

An AI search in 2026 shows no methodologically-sound cost-per-case comparisons among ombuds and HR and legal professionals. There are multiple reasons why conducting accurate cost/benefit comparisons, even of direct costs, is difficult.⁹ However, wide dispute resolution literature on this topic bends powerfully to the belief that, on average, informal case resolution costs less and is found to be more satisfactory for those involved.

24. In the age of AI, human OOs add value in terms of Five EPOCH values.¹⁰

Here is the Abstract from the EPOCH paper: We introduce the EPOCH framework (Empathy, Presence, Opinion, Creativity, and Hope) to capture human capabilities that complement, rather than substitute for, artificial intelligence. **Using network-based methods that map task interdependencies across all U.S. occupations, we develop the metrics: (i) an EPOCH score measuring human-intensive skills, (ii) a potential-for-augmentation score, and (iii) a risk-of-substitution score. This framework explicitly distinguishes AI's role in augmenting versus automating work, addressing a long-standing gap in the literature.** Our results show a clear and counterintuitive shift toward more human-intensive work. New tasks emerging in 2024 carry significantly higher EPOCH scores than pre-existing tasks, and high-EPOCH tasks are performed more frequently. At the occupational level, EPOCH-intensive jobs experienced stronger employment growth from 2015 to 2023, higher hiring rates in 2026, and more favorable projections through 2034. In contrast, occupations with higher substitution risks show consistently negative outcomes across past employment, current hiring, and future projections. Finally, augmentation scores are negatively associated with recent employment and hiring trends—but show no significant link to long-run employment projections.

At present, the value of the five EPOCH talents is not as available—from AI or OmbudsBots—as it is from human ombuds.

i. Empathy

Empathy includes emotional intelligence: sensing how others feel, understanding why, and responding in ways that intend to build trust and provide psychological safety on an individual basis. Ombuds offer discernment, perspective-taking, reading

⁹ See for example a discussion of this point in Joint Inspection Unit. (2015). *Review of the organizational ombudsman services in the United Nations system* (JIU/REP/2015/6). United Nations. <https://docs.un.org/en/jiu/rep/2015/6> and "Identifying and Communicating the Usefulness of Organizational Ombuds, With Ideas about OO Effectiveness and Cost-Effectiveness" (PDF). Rowe, Mary. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* 3, No. 1 (Winter 2010): 9-23.

¹⁰ Loaiza, I., & Rigobon, R. (2024). *The EPOCH of AI: Human-machine complementarities at work* (MIT Sloan Research Paper No. XXXX). MIT Sloan School of Management. Retrieved from <https://papers.ssrn.com/>

- tone and nonverbal cues, thinking about context, and adjusting verbal and physical communication so that each different visitor may feel heard and supported in ways that exceed the capabilities of AI. This may be especially important for bystanders—and the bystanders of bystanders—who often feel they lack standing to bring a concern or good idea.
- ii. **Presence**
Presence is about being there in a rich, human way: building relationships, “reading the room,” and navigating real-time social dynamics, often in physical or synchronous settings. It includes networking, informal influence, and the kind of in-the-moment judgment used when welcoming a group of visitors into the office, facilitating a tense meeting, networking, or coordinating or facilitating the work of others. It includes the skill of sensing hidden agendas... and then helping visitors to recognize and explore hidden agendas.
 - iii. **Opinion**
Opinion combines judgment and ethics, and is involved in making calls in messy, open-ended situations where rules and data do not easily settle dilemmas. It involves fairness; weighing values, feelings, accountability, and long-term consequences; illuminating controversial policies; and handling gray-area misconduct or benefits. Ombuds can help visitors—and the organization—to choose which risks they will decide to accept.
 - iv. **Creativity**
Creativity is the capacity for imagination, originality, and recombining ideas to produce something new or fitting for a unique context. Ombuds are often innovators, asking deep questions, reframing, helping to design options that may be novel in the specific context, improvising in ambiguous situations, offering realistic examples, strategies that are tailor-made for the individual situation—and sometimes even elegant solutions.¹¹
 - v. **Hope**
Hope refers to vision and leadership directed toward a better future, especially when the odds are uncertain or progress is slow. Ombuds can help to design realistic and constructive ways forward, sustaining optimism, and helping visitors and leaders see possibilities beyond their current difficulties. This is especially valuable where the ombuds knows or can predict important changes that may be coming.

An OO could ask feedback about these five points in survey questions; here are possible examples of such survey questions:

Openness and Empathy

I felt that the Ombuds, though remaining impartial about the facts I presented, welcomed me as a person, and understood my feelings and perspective.

Ethics and Judgment

I felt the Ombuds was balanced, fair, and used good judgment in understanding and helping to frame my concerns.

¹¹ See the discussion of elegant solutions in "[Organizational Ombuds' Sources of Power and Influence.](#)" Rowe, Mary. *Journal of the International Ombuds Association* Vol. 16, No 2.

Presence and Human Contact

I felt human connection, understanding and care in my conversation with the Ombuds—who helped me to understand my own interests as well as those around me.

Creativity and Imagination

The Ombuds helped me to re-think a bit, and to come up with creative or non-obvious options—and ways to think about time considerations—that I had not really considered before.

Hope

My interaction with the Ombuds set me to looking forward more—and increased my sense that some positive change may be possible.

25. In the age of AI, the talents and skills of an OO add value in terms of *Five Core Emotional Concerns*.¹²

In their book *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate*, Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro identify five key emotional concerns—appreciation, autonomy, affiliation, status, and role—that are essential for successful human interactions, as they address fundamental human needs. By responding to these concerns, ombuds can foster positive emotions, improve communication, and help their visitors and themselves to build stronger relationships.

At present, being able to address the Five Emotional Concerns is not as easy for AI or OmbudsBots as it is for human ombuds.

Appreciation

People want to feel **appreciated**: understood, heard, and genuinely valued for who they are as individuals. Ombuds often already know and can appreciate many elements of the context in which an individual has worked. When ombuds listen carefully, acknowledge perspectives about what has been happening and what may happen next, *and* recognize strengths, they reduce fear and open the door to considering options with the visitor.

Affiliation

People care about **affiliation**, a sense of human connection rather than “us versus them.” Ombuds can often share information about how the visitor is “not alone” in the context being described. Ombuds work to offer common ground and respect, and,

¹² See Fisher, R., & Shapiro, D. (2005). *Beyond reason: Using emotions as you negotiate*. Viking.

whenever possible, to seek options that may help visitors to mitigate or transform—or escape—hostile or distant relationships in the workplace.

Autonomy

Almost all visitors value **autonomy**, the freedom to have a meaningful say in decisions that affect them. When a person feels controlled or bypassed, or forced to take a certain path, resistance and negative emotion may increase. Ombuds protect the confidentiality, the voice, and the dignity of their visitors; they work to offer realistic options. *Possibly most important value, for many visitors, is that ombuds offer a choice of options tailored to the individual and the situation—and, frequently, a chance to configure or re-configure those options.*

Status

People are sensitive to **status**, their standing relative to others. Treating someone as inferior or dismissing their expertise triggers strong negative emotions, while recognizing an individual's status and competence helps affirm dignity and build trust. Ombuds understand the nuances of status issues in the visitor's situation. Ombuds offer a welcome, offer respect, and offer time regardless of rank—in respecting the status and individual situation of each person who calls on the office.

Role

Each visitor occupies one or more **roles** in the organization (and life), and they want their roles to be meaningful and not demeaning. When a role feels trivialized—misaligned, ignored, maligned or purely symbolic—anxiety, humiliation, anger and sadness may make life miserable. Ombuds offer skills, respect and a hearing to visitors and will endeavor to help develop options that affirm the dignity and importance of each role of each visitor. This can be especially important for visitors in unusual roles in the given situation—like that of newcomers, or bystanders, or family members, or unique experts.

An OO could ask feedback about these points in survey questions; here are possible examples:

Appreciation

“I felt that the Ombuds understood and respected my thoughts, feelings, and concerns.”

Affiliation

“The Ombuds treated me like a partner in problem-solving rather than my being a problem.”

Autonomy

“The Ombuds helped me think through my options and helped me think through my own choices about next steps.”

Status

“I felt that what I do in the organization was acknowledged and taken seriously during our conversation.”

Role

“Our conversation helped me see my role here, and in life, in a way that was important to me.”

26. In the age of AI, OOs add value in terms of three aspects of *Discernment*.¹³

In seeking ways to highlight the value of Ombuds skills we turned to research about discernment. This discussion frames three discernment talents in pragmatic language: sensitivity to social conventions, use of intonation, and world-knowledge-based reasoning.

At present, these three aspects of discernment are not readily available to AI or OmbudsBots.

1. Social conventions

For an ombuds, reading social conventions means accurately sensing norms, power dynamics, and unwritten rules in the visitor’s context (e.g., what is “normal” or taboo in that unit). This talent lets the ombuds understand almost instantly—and perhaps be able to translate—a visitor’s story into how colleagues and the organization may interpret behaviors and messages. The ability to frame and re-frame—what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen—is crucial for exploring safe and realistic options. Ombuds often help visitors identify and understand their own hidden agendas.

2. Intonation

Ombuds constantly interpret not just what visitors and leaders say, but how they say it—tone, hesitations, emphasis, body language—which signal urgency, fear, anger, or ambivalence. Ombuds immediately catch changes in tone. This steady-state discernment of intonation helps the ombuds decide when to slow down, probe gently, or escalate concern. The ombuds may help to interpret the tones— and possibly *changing* “tones” of others in the situation—and, also, to coach visitors on how their own tone has been or may in future be received in difficult conversations.

3. World knowledge-based reasoning

World knowledge-based reasoning maps stories onto broader patterns (e.g., how organizations typically respond, or how actions and policies usually play out) to infer

¹³ See again: Floyd, S., Jouravlev, O., Poliak, M., Mineroff, Z., Gibson, E., & Fedorenko, E. (2025). Three distinct components of pragmatic language use: Social conventions, intonation, and world knowledge–based causal reasoning. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 122(50), e2424400122. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2424400122>

likely consequences for options. In ombuds practice, this talent supports helping visitors test hypotheses about “what has been happening and what now is really going on.” Ombuds are sensitive to explicit and unspoken changes and plans in an organization. Ombuds can help to anticipate the probable impact of different options—possibly in several different milieus—without claiming certainty or giving directive advice.

An OO could ask feedback about these points in survey questions; here are possible examples:

1. “After your meeting, to what extent did you feel the Ombuds demonstrated a useful understanding of the organizational context, an accurate reading of the situation, and key points?”

2. “How well did the Ombuds seem able to ‘read between the lines’—picking up on emotions, norms, and likely consequences—in ways that helped you think more clearly about your options and about how others might read your tone as you pursue an option?”

How Can Ombuds Collect and Communicate Data About These Sources of Value and Effectiveness?

Nine Questions to Consider

When considering collecting and communicating data about a particular source of ombuds value and influence, we can ourselves the nine questions below. The options below are general; for each specific source of value, choose those ideas that are appropriate to that topic.

- Can I communicate this source of value through the OO Office website and posters?
- Can I communicate it through OO office outreach activities?¹⁴
- Can I communicate it through writing and speaking about OO Practice?
- Can I collect data about it through careful collection of all feedback from notes, emails, commendations, evaluations, and articles mentioning the office?
- Can I gather insights about this source of value from my OO office database, my Friday checklist, and note them in my annual report?
- Can I collect (and communicate) data on this source of value by being included in organizational surveys—or from my Ombuds Office surveys?
- Can I use the operationally useful data from the International Ombuds Association Practice Surveys in my communications?

¹⁴ See “Keys to Opening and Maintaining an Ombuds Office,” Presented by Ronnie Thomson and Reese Ramos International Ombuds Association Annual Conference, April 2023 **50 Outreach and Marketing Ideas when Launching and Maintaining an Ombuds Program.**

- Can I communicate operationally useful data on this topic in my contacts with leadership, unit managers, CMS managers, affinity groups and random discussions throughout the year?
- Can I collect and communicate useful data on this topic from visitors to the OO office and alleged offenders, and from responders/resource people in other offices in my organization?

Note: This article draft is part of a Resource Repository designed to support identifying—and helping to quantify—the value of an Organizational Ombuds (OO). This Resource Repository is a work in progress. It is open to improvements, additions, deletions, critique, revision and random commentary. If any page in the repository is helpful, or needs revision, please let us know. Please contact Mary Rowe or other co-authors, if you can help to improve these pages or have another page to offer.