Some Organizational Ombuds Achievements Reported in the 2024 IOA Survey
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Working Paper

Ombuds Achievements. Employers and all the other constituents of an organizational ombuds may wonder what their ombuds accomplishes each year. How are individuals helped? How are groups helped? How is the organization itself better off? In the reports from OOs in 2024, many individual and systemic changes are quite common, and are adding value to many people. Other accomplishments are less common, on a yearly basis, but each one may be very significant.

This short report gives just a few examples of OO contributions to their visitors and to all their constituents including their organization. We illustrate 2024 IOA Survey results with a few examples.

Bridge-building. The most common yearly achievement reported by OOs was having fostered a bridge between colleagues, units or agencies. Ombuds frequently work with individuals in conflict—and, also, assist work teams. As examples, an ombuds may regularly work with a cohort of faculty, managers or staff—or with specialized professionals, who work together across the organization and wish to collaborate better. The OO may assist different units or different agencies in a large organization to share scarce resources and otherwise support each other under stress.

By the same token an OO may foster improvement in morale—or support the retention of valuable employees—*within* a unit. For example, they may inspire managers to include employees in more of the unit's decision-making or find ways to celebrate specific accomplishments.

Surfacing new and significant concerns and ideas. Most ombuds have unusually wide "catchments" of information throughout their organization. Many ombuds report that they have helped to identify a significant new issue or pattern of concerns that was not well recognized. Sometimes an issue is literally new, like helping to identify an unexpected health or safety issue. For example, an OO might happen to be the first to notice that different employees (or students abroad) who traveled to different parts of another country are suddenly reporting the same unusual health problems. Other issues have simply not been attended to, like a failure to update the lighting at night for third shift workers coming into a specific building. An ombuds might pick up on the fact that employees have needed safe pick-up and drop-off places for taxis and other transportation and effectively help to see that this need is met.

Supporting needed changes in policies, procedures and structures. More than half of the OOs reported helping to inspire a needed change in a policy or procedure the previous year. This might be significant for many constituents, e.g., forbidding the attachment of bicycles to handicap ramps. The change might be a new definition in the misconduct policy, like "deliberate interference with the integrity of the work of others."

The change might appear routine, but help many people—like changing the lunch hours of many non-exempt employees in a way that is equally good for managers but more convenient for the employees—and thus improve the quality of life at work.

Ombuds often contribute to policy development. As examples, OOs might offer data that would support improvements in a policy because of changing circumstances due to weather. The OO might be asked to facilitate meetings about a proposed new policy—or suggest options for dealing with resource constraints in different organizational units. An ombuds might be consulted about changes in organizational structure.

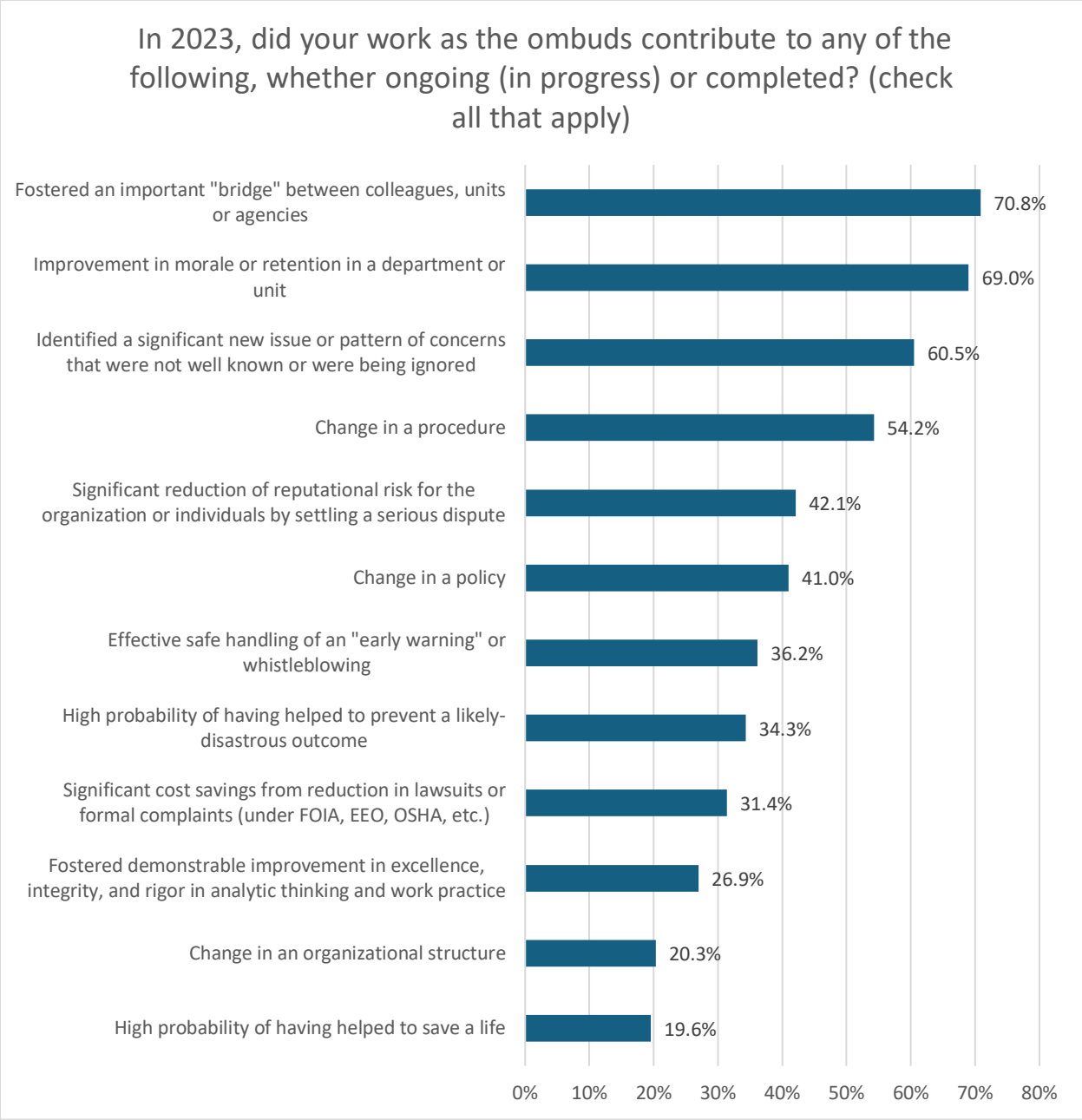
Social identity conflicts and concerns. About half of the ombuds reported contributing significantly to inclusion efforts of their employer. In the past year this often meant working to help constituents deal with social identity issues. Individual OOs report working with political and religious and ethnic concerns, race, gender, disability and generational tensions, language and dress, appearance, time preferences, food preferences, and/or space preferences.

Significant Cost-savings. Some yearly achievements directly affect the bottom line for employers as well as the welfare of the visitors who come to an OO office. These included “helping with a significant reduction in reputational risk for the organization or individuals.” An Ombuds might for example have helped in catching and dealing with unfounded rumors. An Ombuds might read a draft announcement of a new task force in the organization—and catch an embarrassing mistake in acknowledging an invention or using an incorrect source of data.

Other contributions help directly in saving costs. Effective safe handling of an early warning or informal whistleblowing was reported by more than a third of OOs. A high probability of “helping to prevent a likely-disastrous outcome” was reported by a third for OOs.

Significant cost savings from potential lawsuits and formal complaints were reported by some OOs. Managers, employers, post docs, trainees and students in various institutions frequently consult with ombuds when they are concerned or puzzled about something. Some OOs reported that they had “fostered significant improvement in excellence, integrity and rigor in analytic thinking and work practice.” Some reported that there was a high probability that they had helped to save a life. Some reported a high probability of having helped to prevent criminal or near criminal behavior.

It is not possible to list all the accomplishments of OOs in one survey and the importance of each achievement may be different in each organization. The companion IOA Report about OOs’ Most Serious Cases may also be helpful to readers.


In 2023, did your work as the ombuds contribute to any of the following, whether ongoing (in progress) or completed? (check all that apply)
Fostered an important "bridge" between colleagues, units or agencies
70.8%
Improvement in morale or retention in a department or unit
69.0%
Identified a significant new issue or pattern of concerns that were not well known or were being ignored
60.5%
Change in a procedure
54.2%
Significant reduction of reputational risk for the organization or individuals by settling a serious dispute
42.1%
Change in a policy
41.0%
Effective safe handling of an "early warning" or whistleblowing
36.2%
High probability of having helped to prevent a likely-disastrous outcome
34.3%
Significant cost savings from reduction in lawsuits or formal complaints (under FOIA, EEO, OSHA, etc.)
31.4%
Fostered demonstrable improvement in excellence, integrity, and rigor in analytic thinking and work practice
26.9%
Change in an organizational structure
20.3%
High probability of having helped to save a life
19.6%
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%