

PERSONNEL WORLD

CORPORATE OMBUDSMEN

In academic and professional-practice literature, there are significant writings about the ombudsman's role in US and foreign organizations. The bulk of this information, however, is directed toward public-sector organizations and government agencies. Few articles deal with the ombudsman in private industry.

A 1967 article by Isadore Silver, "The Corporate Ombudsman," for the *Harvard Business Review*, stands as the classic reference for the private-sector ombudsman. The scarcity of articles during the next 20 years makes the need for additional information obvious.

This neglect prompted the Corporate Ombudsman Association (COA) to initiate a study outlining the nature and characteristics of the ombudsman's role in the private sector. The study, which took about four years to complete, also is designed to provide a description of the activities and problems faced by ombudsmen and their companies.

The methodology involved in producing the survey, including the sample group, survey procedure, questionnaire and research topics, as well as the analysis plan, is as follows:

Sample group. The sample group was developed from lists the association provided. It represents a variety of ombudsmen in diversity, size of employee group served, budget levels and duration of program. The total number of respondents, however, still is rel-

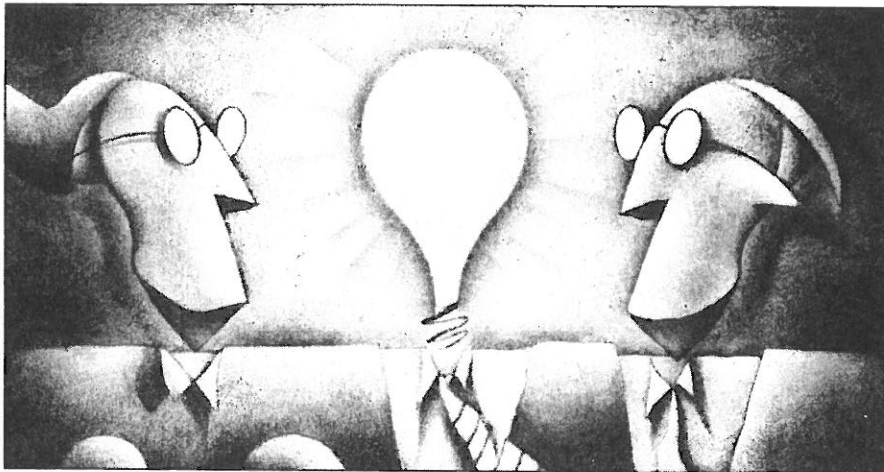


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atively small, making generalizations risky. (The sample is being expanded as additional ombudsmen are identified.)

Procedure. The survey questionnaire was mailed to members of the COA and to attendees of three annual association meetings. Questionnaires addressed to persons who no longer were ombudsmen were passed on to the new ombudsman in the relevant company. Additional ombudsmen were identified as a result of the follow-up process and subsequently were sent questionnaires.

Along with the questionnaire was a memo describing the purpose of the study. A postcard also was enclosed, addressed to the group at The Pennsylvania State University handling research. On the back of the postcard, respondents indicated whether they had returned their questionnaire. This allowed researchers to identify those who had returned their surveys without individual identification. After a couple of weeks, those who received forms but had not yet replied were contacted in an attempt to increase participation. All replies to questionnaire items were confidential.

Instrument. Topics included in the questionnaire were developed through

individual interviews with ombudsmen and through surveys and inquiries at the annual conferences.

Analysis plan. The survey analysis was initiated with frequency of response counts. The responses then were compared to interview data collected in 1986 and 1987 by the research team.

The interview data serve as a second validating source of information.

Suggestions for future research topics were solicited to ensure that future research is practitioner oriented and practical.

Study Findings Are Tentative

As the survey sample numbers increase (through continuing follow-up and contacts at conferences), additional analyses will be added (e.g., comparisons of new/old program characteristics, separations by company size, type of business and so on). The intent simply was to initiate the study, not to develop and present final conclusions based on an exhaustive data set. The following is a look at some study findings.

Titles. Sixty percent of those sampled have "ombudsman" in their title. There was no consistency in other titles listed, which tended to relate to the program concept and label in a particular company (e.g., alternative communications channel or franchise liaison manager). At the beginning of the study, only 12% reported using "ombudsman" in their titles.

Position description. Descriptions of the positions are as diverse as the titles.

There are, however, common themes. They include: listening to and handling employee and manager complaints and concerns; acting as an unbiased third party; and acting as a communication and reporting link between employees and management. From the descriptions, it is clear that listening, with an action-oriented follow-up, are the key activities.

Problem importance. There was keen interest in discovering which problems were considered most important. This question, however, must be broken into three parts — important to whom, ombudsman, client or corporation? Respondents were asked to differentiate between the interests of the three.

To *ombudsmen*, the most important problems involve management practices (accountability, managerial deficiency and management styles, for example) and unfair treatment (termination and inconsistency). There are few points of consensus on problem importance, as responses range from job security to addictions to harassment and communication.

To *clients* (as reported by ombudsmen), the most important problems were fear of job loss and actual terminations, harassment and general fairness. Almost half (45%) could be classified as career concerns (e.g., pay/benefits, terminations and transfers). The second largest grouping (40%) was management practices. Clients also value a demonstration of caring, some career guidance and assistance with understanding and interpreting personnel decisions and policies.

To the *corporation*, the most important problems seem to be ethical concerns, such as waste, fraud, abuse, performance appraisals and termination management.

Clear differences did not emerge from these responses, and it is important to remember that the "importance" rankings for clients and the organization are from the perspective of the ombudsman. A different ranking might be found if clients and management were asked the same question.

Techniques. Many ombudsmen

have an interest in the successful techniques of colleagues. They were asked to provide successful approaches to problems and how they publicize the function.

The approaches cited involved advising, teaching effective confrontation, mediation-negotiation and participant observation, which are almost the full-range of third-party/clinician/counselor approaches. Notably absent was judging who is right or making and enforcing decisions.

Publicity. One critical task for ombudsmen is informing management and employees about programs. What techniques and methods are used to get the word out? Ombudsmen identified a variety of techniques, such as articles, brochures, videos, posters, presentations, orientations, notes and newsletters.

None are particularly unusual, but as a group they represent a variety of marketing methods. The ratio of relatively standard methods to more informal means appears to be increasing in comparison to earlier studies.

Most Contact Takes Place over the Telephone

Client contact methods. Of the three ways to make contact with the ombudsman's office — phone, mail (including electronic mail) and in person — respondents estimated that from 50-100% of their clients first made contact by telephone. Most suggested that 25% or fewer of their clients use the mail and fewer than 25% first contacted the office in person. There is a rising yet still small proportion of contacts by electronic mail.

Several programs operate almost exclusively by telephone. Ombudsmen said the anonymity and security of confidentiality offered by telephone access contribute significantly to a willingness to present a complaint.

Record keeping. The degree to which records are developed also was questioned. Some two-thirds of the respondents said the office keeps a list of all contacts to the office. A few restrict this list (for example, to those cli-

ents who go beyond the initial contact).

About 40% say they keep information on the particulars of certain cases. About one-third of the ombudsmen keep information on cases but do not retain identifying names. Only two ombudsmen indicated they keep no records at all.

Record use. When asked how records were used, respondents said they use aggregated data for policy reports to management, for their own reference in case handling and for reports on their personal effectiveness. Not all ombudsmen use the data available to them for all of these purposes. An increasing number now are writing about their work.

Employee population. Information also was requested on the number of employees and managers in the division of the company. The responses were distributed between fewer than 2,500; from 2,500-5,000; from 5,000-7,500; and more than 7,500. The distribution does not give an indication of how large an employee group one ombudsman serves. Further investigation is needed.

The number of employees who can be served by an ombudsman varies with program design. A program model that requires personal investigation, significant formal report write-up and feedback can serve fewer employees per year than one with much less formality or one that is telephone based.

Employee types. Another set of questions was designed to address the uncertainty surrounding the relationships between ombudsmen and unions.

Unionized versus nonunionized. Ombudsmen tend to provide service more often to nonunionized employees. Only a small number of unionized employees are currently served, either because the entire organization is non-union or because union members are excluded as a class or for certain types of problems (most frequently those could be classed in the union contract's grievance procedure). Only one union/management-designed ombudsman office was reported, although some 75% of all ombudsman offices serve at least some union members without overt

union objection. Some ombudsman clients are referred by union officials in some companies.

Exempt and nonexempt. Most ombudsmen clients are nonexempt employees, because most companies have greater numbers of these workers. In many companies, ombudsmen appear to serve nonexempt employees and managers proportionately.

Excluded employees. Respondents were asked whether any type or class of employees are excluded. About 20% said they exclude certain types of workers (usually union members). During interviews, several ombudsmen said they did not formally serve senior management. It appears, however, that few types of workers are excluded from ombudsman service. Concern that an ombudsman's service would not be successful with certain classes or types of employees is inconsistent with research data.

Shop Stewards Approve of Referrals

Referral sources. Information was sought on types of referral sources and estimated frequency. Approximately 60% of the ombudsmen said they received referrals from supervisors, personnel departments, former clients and friends. Only about 25% indicated they received referrals from shop stewards or other union officials.

This figure implies a strong level of shop steward acceptance. Employee assistance program (EAP) personnel were noted as referral sources by only 38% of the ombudsmen; this may be accounted for by the lack of EAP programs in some corporations and will be investigated further.

Approaches and techniques used. What approaches and techniques do ombudsmen most frequently use during their work? Those with the highest frequencies include:

- Active listening
- Describing options
- Investigating cases
- Assisting with upward feedback (systems change).

The distribution again indicates a

wide diversity of techniques for resolving complaints.

At the bottom of the list were arbitration/adjudication (lowest mentioned item), mediation and turning the case over to others.

The two sets of rankings support the view that ombudsmen often help clients take an active, effective role in solving their personal problems rather than using decisions made and imposed by others.

The surprisingly low rank of mediation can be explained by the comment of one ombudsman, "My first rule is never embarrass anybody. Bringing disputants together in front of me might create embarrassment and make resolution more difficult."

Work-time distribution. How is the work day spent? The following averages were compiled: complaint handling (56%); advising and consulting, including upward feedback and systems change (17%); education (5%); marketing and promotion (7%); administration (8%); and other (4%). Although advising and consulting time was limited, it may have stronger ultimate impact. The unique ability of the ombudsman to obtain unfiltered, uncondensed data that are not slanted for the purpose of influencing policy or personnel evaluations may be dependent upon individual complaints remaining the primary focus of the office.

Power. Ombudsmen were asked to identify the sources of their power. How are they able to assist in problem resolution? Approximately 40% said their personal ability was a primary source. In their view, power is a derivative of personal characteristics. Organizational positions and/or a link to superiors, however, also were cited by the vast majority of respondents.

Case-type frequency. The frequency of various types of cases (e.g., terminations, transfers, personnel policies and so on) also was questioned. The most frequent cases were:

- Hierarchical conflicts (supervision/subordinate tensions)
- Performance evaluation
- Promotion

- Termination
- Salaries/benefits
- General "meanness" (all kinds of harassment) and psychological problems

- Transfer/work assignments.

Types of cases and exclusions.

Ombudsmen are interested in knowing whether similar types of cases are handled by their peers or if significant differences exist. There also is some question as to whether ombudsmen specifically exclude certain types of cases.

From the responses, it appears that the following case types are sometimes or always excluded by some practitioners:

- Cases handled by other offices
- Formal grievance/privileged legal cases
- Government contract compliance issues
- Pensions
- Discrimination
- Sexual harassment.

Some exclude programs that are barred by the rules of the corporation or by law. Many offices, however, deal with equal opportunity issues, and many will deal jointly with problems being handled by other offices.

Ombudsmen Do Not See the Job as Stressful

Burnout. At previous conferences the stress involved in ombudsman work was cited. Discussions of stress management and coping mechanisms suggested that some ombudsmen handle stress well, while others burn out. Survey items were included to determine whether a particular burnout problem exists in this group. The data indicate that: Ombudsmen, as a group, do not perceive themselves as highly stressed and are not moving toward burnout. This however, may be a select sample of ombudsman with high abilities to cope with stress.

Budget and ombudsman numbers. Respondents were asked for budget estimations. The figures indicate the typical budget (median) is \$100,000 (1986 data). The range began at \$5,000 with a high of \$350,000. Nine cited

budgets from \$75,000-125,000, while another nine had budgets from \$180,000-350,000. Approximately 60% are between \$75,000 and \$350,000.

Also indicated is the fact that 92% of the offices surveyed were small (one or two ombudsmen).

Length of tenure at company. Responses indicate that most ombudsmen have from 10-20 years and more with the company. Only a small number (4%) have been with the organization less than five years.

Education. Educational back-

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ground also was examined to find to what extent ombudsmen come from similar preparation. Business is the most frequent area of preparation, with 50% citing such an education.

Salary. Estimates ranged from \$25,000 to more than \$100,000, with \$75,000 being the median figure in 1986. (This does not include benefits and bonus.) Salaries differ according to the organizational level of the ombudsman and to the number of workers served. Salary also is affected by the nature of the organization and by the salary level of the person when entering the position.

Case example, topics. Case descriptions were requested to expand the pool of examples for training and development use at conferences and for inclusion in the ombudsman handbook.

Many problem examples were provided, including some of the following topics:

- Termination system design
- Fake data

- Job loss fear
- University training cost recovery
- Future promotion blockage
- Employee threats
- Nonreceipt of promised increase.

Respondents also were asked to identify issues and concerns they would like to see in subsequent surveys, including:

- Relationships with line managers
- Addictions and mental health
- Upward feedback and communications methods
- Alternative techniques.

There has been little research on corporate ombudsman programs to date. The above defined topics and others suggest a research agenda for the next few years.

It appears that ombudsmen, although still relatively few in numbers as an identified group, have established a critical role and function in some major private companies. They are dealing with significant issues that have the potential for strong impact on their respective companies. The ombudsman appears to be gaining a significant position within private industry as a key element of a comprehensive problem-resolution system. ■

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