The AI-Powered Ombudsman: A Boon or a Curse?

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping workplace conflict resolution and raising important questions about the future of the ombudsman role in both public and private domains. This theoretical paper examines whether AI integration represents a boon—enhancing efficiency, accessibility, and fairness—or a curse—undermining empathy, confidentiality, and ethical standards. Drawing on frameworks such as interest-based negotiation, structural conflict theory, the dual concern model, and ombudsman principles, the study evaluates the capabilities and limitations of AI-powered tools in triaging cases, analyzing conflict patterns, and facilitating resolutions. It explores real-world examples, including AI-driven mediation platforms, chatbots, and other AI-based tools, while highlighting risks such as algorithmic bias, lack of emotional intelligence, and data privacy concerns. The paper ultimately proposes a hybrid AI–human ombudsman model, where AI manages routine or high-volume tasks while human ombuds professionals provide oversight, judgment, and emotional nuance. Recommendations include integrating transparency, regulatory clarity, and training in AI ethics. By offering a conceptual framework for responsibly embedding AI in ombuds services, this paper contributes to the emerging field of AI in conflict resolution while underscoring the need to preserve the core human values of neutrality, confidentiality, and accessibility.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, ombudsman, conflict resolution, ethical standards, AI–human hybrid model, AI-assisted mediation

Introduction

Background and Context

Conflict resolution is essential in workplaces to enable fairness, psychological safety, and organizational health. Unresolved workplace disputes lead to poor morale, reduced productivity, high turnover, and even legal exposure (Johnson, 2023). To prevent escalation and support early resolution, many organizations have implemented internal systems—among the most trusted of which is the office of the ombudsman.

The term “ombudsman” originates from the Swedish language, meaning “representative” or “proxy.” First established in Sweden in 1809 as a government accountability role, the ombudsman was tasked with investigating complaints against public officials and ensuring administrative justice. Over time, the role evolved to encompass organizational and corporate ombudsman functions, particularly in educational, governmental, and workplace settings (National Ombudsman Association, 2021). While the terms “ombuds” or “ombudsperson” are increasingly used to reflect the gender-neutral language, this paper will use the original term “ombudsman,” both out of respect for its historical roots and for consistency with professional association usage.

The ombudsman operates under four core principles: independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality (National Ombudsman Association, 2021). These principles form the foundation for all ombudsman work, though their application varies by context—government oversight roles, corporate organizations, or educational institutions. In each setting, the ombudsman serves as a trustworthy, off-the-record resource for conflict resolution. Usually, the ombudsman services are provided as an independent resource outside of the traditional management structures. This alternative structure creates a safe, impartial space for individuals to raise issues, explore options, and seek resolution pathways while eliminating the reporting structure bias.

Traditional ombudsman services, however, face significant limitations. Many offices are under-resourced and responsible for large, distributed populations, which can result in delayed case handling, limited accessibility, or uneven service delivery. Additionally, although ombudsmen are trained to be impartial, unconscious biases and institutional constraints may still affect consistency and fairness (Ahmad, 2025).

In contrast, artificial intelligence (AI) offers powerful tools that could augment dispute resolution efforts. AI is increasingly used in legal technology, online dispute resolution (ODR), and human resources to triage complaints, analyze trends, and suggest fair settlements (Johnson, 2023; Lee, 2022). Technologies such as chatbots, machine learning classifiers, and predictive analytics promise efficiency, objectivity, scalability, and around-the-clock availability. -Even beyond formal conflict resolution, AI-driven assistants like Grammarly (n.d.) showcase the technology's ability to enhance human work by improving writing, ensuring communication clarity, and maintaining consistency.

Therefore, this paper explores whether the ombudsman's human-centric, trust-based role is fundamentally compatible with AI's data-driven logic or is inherently at odds. While the ombudsman's relational work seems challenging to replicate algorithmically, AI may be well-suited for handling data-heavy tasks such as case intake, trend detection, or drafting options for resolution. A potential outcome is a hybrid model in which AI augments—but does not replace—the human ombudsman, preserving the office's core values while addressing resource and scale challenges.

Problem Narrative and Significance

Although AI is being rapidly integrated into legal and HR conflict management systems, there is little academic or practical research examining its use in ombudsman work, particularly in corporate and institutional contexts. Existing studies focus on fully automated ODR systems or AI applications in formal mediation and arbitration rather than on the ombudsman's nuanced, informal, and trust-based processes (Losey, 2024). There is also a notable absence of research on hybrid models where AI works in tandem with human ombudsmen. Questions remain about how such systems would uphold core ethical principles like neutrality, confidentiality, and independence. Moreover, the regulatory and legal landscape surrounding AI in informal workplace dispute resolution is still developing, raising concerns about liability, due process, and employee trust (Ahmad, 2025). These lapses are especially significant given what is at stake ethically and organizationally: if AI is introduced into ombudsman work without appropriate safeguards, it could compromise the integrity of the very office it aims to enhance.

Theoretical Foundations

This study draws upon several foundational theories to explore the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into corporate ombudsman services. These theories offer a perspective to evaluate AI's potential benefits and challenges in workplace conflict resolution:

a. Interest-based Negotiation (Fisher & Ury, 1981) emphasizes collaborative problem-solving by focusing on underlying interests rather than positions. Understanding the needs and concerns of all stakeholders, including employees, management, and the ombudsman, will be critical when implementing AI tools. Considering the needs of all involved rather than positions would allow the technology to facilitate, rather than hinder, mutual understanding and agreement.
b. Structural Conflict Theory (Burton, 1990) examines how systemic issues such as power imbalances and organizational structures contribute to conflict. Introducing AI into ombudsman services could either mitigate or exacerbate these structural issues. For instance, AI could help identify patterns of systemic conflict through data analysis. Still, it could also reinforce existing power dynamics if not implemented with careful consideration of organizational hierarchies and employee autonomy.
c. The Dual Concern Model (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986) examines how people manage conflict based on their concern for themselves versus others. When considering bringing AI into ombudsman work, it will be important that these tools help strike a balance between assertiveness and empathy. The technology would need to support the relational aspects of conflict resolution at the heart of what the ombudsman does.

Ethical frameworks for artificial intelligence, such as UNESCO’s 2021 Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, highlight the importance of transparency, accountability, and human oversight. These principles are fundamental to ombudsman services, where trust and ethical integrity are paramount. For AI tools to be practical in this context, they must operate transparently, be accountable for their outcomes, and remain under human supervision to ensure alignment with ethical standards.

A hybrid model would leverage the strengths of artificial intelligence while preserving the human qualities essential to the ombudsman's role, including empathy, ethical judgment, and contextual understanding. By combining technological capabilities with human insight, this approach would enhance the effectiveness of ombudsman services without compromising their core values.

Core Question

To what extent does implementing AI-powered systems enhance or hinder the effectiveness and ethical integrity of the ombudsman's role in organizational or governmental dispute resolution?

To address the above inquiry question, this paper will explore three key areas in which AI could augment, replace, or improve ombudsman services:

1. Improving Ombudsman Efficiency and Consistency

AI can significantly increase the efficiency of ombudsman offices by automating routine functions such as case intake, issue classification, and pattern analysis (Johnson, 2023). Automation may allow an ombudsman's office to handle a greater volume of cases without sacrificing response time or procedural fairness. Additionally, AI can support conflict resolution consistency by identifying past case trends and generating standardized recommendations, especially for high-frequency, low-complexity matters (Lee, 2022). These enhancements could

be particularly valuable in large, decentralized organizations where scalability and consistency are persistent challenges.

2. Ethical and Practical Risks of AI in Ombudsman Work

Despite its promise, AI raises critical ethical concerns when applied to informal conflict resolution. Systems trained on biased data may unintentionally perpetuate inequities or produce outcomes that undermine fairness and neutrality—principles central to the ombudsman role (Ahmad, 2025). Moreover, AI has a low emotional quotient (EQ) or lacks emotional intelligence, limiting its ability to interpret complex interpersonal dynamics or respond appropriately to sensitive, emotionally charged disclosures. Practical issues such as transparency, explainability of AI decisions, and data privacy further complicate trust in AI-driven processes, particularly in settings where confidentiality is paramount.

3. Potential for Hybrid AI–Human Ombudsman Models

Rather than framing AI as a replacement for the ombudsman, a hybrid model envisions AI as a support tool that enhances—but does not supplant—human judgment and empathy. In this model, AI systems would handle data-intensive and procedural aspects of the role (for example, information gathering or initial case triage), while human ombudsmen would provide oversight, make final decisions, facilitate dialogue, and manage the human nuances of conflicts. Such integration could relieve ombudsmen of certain administrative burdens, allowing them to focus on high-impact cases that require human insight and emotional intelligence. Any hybrid framework must be thoughtfully designed to align with established ombudsman standards and build stakeholder trust (National Ombudsman Association, 2021).

Thesis Statement

This paper explores the integration of artificial intelligence in ombudsman services, weighing its potential to enhance efficiency, scalability, and consistency against the risks of undermining essential human factors such as empathy, trust, and ethical standards in workplace conflict resolution. By evaluating AI's capabilities and limitations through established conflict resolution frameworks, the study emphasizes a balanced, hybrid model that preserves the core values of ombuds services while leveraging AI for improved accessibility and operational effectiveness.

Overview of the Paper

The paper begins by outlining the background and context of AI integration into workplace conflict resolution, followed by a detailed literature review of existing research on AI in alternative dispute resolution. The theoretical framework section connects relevant theories to the research question, setting the stage for an analysis of the potential benefits and challenges of AI in ombudsman services. The discussion then explores the implications of a hybrid human-AI model, considering ethical, legal, and practical considerations. The paper concludes with recommendations for implementing AI that uphold the core values of the ombudsman profession.

Literature Review

Summary of AI Integration in Ombudsman and Dispute Resolution Services

The growing field of online dispute resolution (ODR) has the potential to use the capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI) in managing high-volume, low-complexity disputes. Platforms such as SmartSettle, Modria, and ResolveAI leverage algorithms to facilitate

resolution processes by evaluating data, generating settlement options, and assisting parties in reaching agreements without direct human intervention (Johnson, 2023; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). While initially developed for consumer disputes, insurance claims, and family mediation, these platforms are increasingly applied as potential models for resolving organizational conflicts across industries.

Research has increasingly explored the deployment of AI-driven tools both in mediation contexts and within human resources departments, particularly for complaint triage, early intervention, and sentiment analysis. Studies highlight how systems such as chatbots, predictive analytics platforms, and automated dashboards are being used to detect emotional tone, escalate concerns, and manage conflicts more proactively across organizational settings (Lee, 2022; Losey, 2024; Berendt, 2022).

However, the integration of AI into ombudsman services raises important ethical and legal questions. Researchers note that AI's decision-making processes must be transparent and accountable to avoid undermining procedural fairness (Ahmad, 2025; Barfield & Pagallo, 2018). Concerns such as a lack of explainability, the potential for algorithmic bias, and the absence of culturally competent programming could damage the trust essential to ombudsman processes. This is particularly important because of the ombudsman's core values of neutrality, confidentiality, and informality.

While the literature acknowledges AI's efficiency and consistency benefits, it also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a human-centered approach, particularly in contexts that require empathy, discretion, and cultural sensitivity (UNESCO, 2021; Fisher & Ury, 1981). As such, scholars advocate for hybrid frameworks that blend AI's analytical power with the emotional intelligence and ethical judgment of trained ombuds professionals.

Algorithmic Bias & Fairness

Despite growing interest in AI-driven tools for conflict resolution, concerns about algorithmic bias and fairness remain. AI systems are only as unbiased as the data used to train them, and numerous studies have demonstrated that machine learning models can inadvertently reproduce and amplify existing social biases (Ahmad, 2025; Barocas, Hardt, & Narayanan, 2019). In the context of ombudsman services, where neutrality and fairness are foundational values, these risks are particularly problematic.

Bias in AI systems can come from multiple sources, including historical discrimination in the datasets, the selection of training features, or the designers' unconscious assumptions (Binns, 2018). For example, suppose AI tools are trained on past HR complaint resolutions or legal outcomes reflecting systemic biases, such as underreporting of workplace harassment or racial disparities in discipline. In that case, they may reinforce those patterns rather than correct them.

In addition to bias, issues of explainability can be a challenge. Many AI algorithms, particularly those based on deep learning, operate as "black boxes" and have limited transparency into how decisions are made (Doshi-Velez & Kim, 2017). This lack of clarity can undermine due process in the context of ombudsman services. If individuals cannot understand why their complaint was classified in a certain way or why a particular resolution was recommended, they may perceive the process as arbitrary or unjust, even if the outcome is reasonable.

To safeguard fairness in AI-assisted ombuds services, researchers recommend embedding ethical review practices, bias audits, and transparent feedback loops into the design and deployment of these tools (Raji et al., 2020). Aligning AI processes with the ombudsman's

values requires a deliberate effort to mitigate bias and ensure that decisions are explainable and appealable.

Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

One of the most persistent critiques of AI in conflict resolution is its lack of human-like emotional intelligence. Empathy, the capacity to recognize, understand, and respond to the emotions of others, is a cornerstone of effective ombudsman work. It fosters trust, de-escalates tension, and enables a psychologically safe space for individuals to voice concerns. Unlike human practitioners, AI lacks the intuitive capacity to read emotional cues, interpret nonverbal communication, or adapt responses based on contextual and cultural sensitivity (Ahmad, 2025; Lee, 2022).

Chatbot-based mediation systems and AI-powered intake tools have already been deployed in various contexts, with mixed results. While users may appreciate these systems' speed and anonymity, studies have shown that parties often express dissatisfaction when the interaction feels impersonal or does not consider the emotional context (Losey, 2024). In emotionally charged cases, such as those involving workplace bullying, discrimination, or trauma, the absence of a human listener can worsen the feelings of isolation or invalidate the individual's experience.

This limitation is not merely cosmetic; it undermines the core of what the ombudsman role provides. As Fisher and Ury (1981) emphasize in their interest-based negotiation framework, the ability to deeply understand a party's needs and emotions is critical for uncovering creative, durable solutions to the conflict. No matter how advanced, AI cannot yet fully grasp the nuances of grief, fear, or moral injury—responses that often emerge in workplace conflicts. AI interactions are programmed, not felt, and this can compromise the therapeutic and restorative potential of the ombudsman process.

Researchers caution that while AI may enhance ombudsman efficiency in procedural tasks, its current limitations in emotional intelligence present significant challenges for its use as a standalone tool (Ahmad, 2025; Lee, 2022)

Hybrid Models

Rather than replacing the ombudsman role, the most promising approach to AI integration envisions a hybrid model, where AI augments human judgment and emotional intelligence. In this design, AI technologies would be responsible for data-heavy, administrative tasks—such as case intake, pattern detection, and triage—while human ombudsman professionals would continue to lead relationship-centered work: facilitating dialogues, interpreting context, building trust, and helping parties reach resolution (Leung, 2022; International Ombuds Association, 2022).

Early pilots of AI-assisted mediation suggest that AI can enhance access and consistency for routine matters, but falls short when human empathy, moral reasoning, or complex negotiations are needed (Losey, 2024; Lee, 2022). Research emphasizes that user satisfaction with AI-mediated processes is closely tied to transparency, fairness, and the ability to escalate to a human when necessary (Williams & Young, 2021).

The International Ombuds Association (2022) has proposed preliminary guidelines for hybrid models, recommending that AI systems:

- Respect confidentiality through secure data handling.
- Enable human override and appeal at any stage.

- Clearly disclose the role of AI to users.
- Undergo regular audits for fairness and bias.

In proposed hybrid ombudsman models, AI acts as a silent partner, managing information and analytics, while human ombudsmen retain ethical responsibility for final actions and decisions. Emerging research suggests that hybrid models address limitations identified in both purely human- and AI-driven systems (Leung, 2022; Susskind, 2019).

Trust and Satisfaction

Trust is a critical component of any conflict resolution process, and it becomes even more crucial when artificial intelligence is involved. Research into user experiences with AI-driven online dispute resolution (AI-ODR) platforms consistently shows that participants desire not only efficient outcomes but also a sense of fairness, empathy, and procedural transparency (Williams & Young, 2021). Despite AI's ability to streamline processes and deliver consistent results, users often report discomfort or dissatisfaction when interactions feel impersonal or when decision-making processes are opaque.

Williams and Young (2021) found that while users appreciate the convenience of AI-assisted platforms, trust erodes quickly when there is a lack of clarity about how decisions are made or when users feel that their unique circumstances have not been fully considered. Transparency and explainability—users' ability to understand how and why particular outcomes were reached—emerged as key factors in predicting trust in AI-mediated systems. Without sufficient transparency, even fair outcomes may be perceived as arbitrary or unjust, undermining both user satisfaction and the legitimacy of the dispute resolution process.

In ombudsman work, where confidentiality, neutrality, and trust are foundational, these concerns become even more pronounced. Researchers emphasize that AI-assisted ombudsman systems should prioritize intentional transparency to maintain user trust (Williams & Young, 2021).

Research suggests that building and maintaining trust in AI-augmented ombudsman services requires attention not only to technological sophistication but also to preserving the relational, human-centered aspects of conflict resolution that foster psychological safety and confidence (Williams & Young, 2021; Leung, 2022).

Methods of Literature Review

This study employed a theoretical research design, focusing on the collection, synthesis, and critical analysis of existing scholarship at the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and ombudsman services. Given the emerging nature of this field, the research process emphasized breadth, depth, and critical evaluation rather than primary data collection.

Literature Identification and Selection

A combination of traditional academic databases, such as Google Scholar and the CSUDH Library, and advanced AI-assisted research tools was used to gather literature. Search strategies included combinations of keywords such as “artificial intelligence and conflict resolution,” “AI in workplace dispute resolution,” “online dispute resolution (ODR),” “algorithmic bias,” “AI ethics,” and “ombudsman services.” Searches were refined using Boolean operators and filters for peer-reviewed publications, white papers, and reports from reputable professional organizations.

Special attention was given to sourcing scholarship published within the last five years (2020–2025) to ensure relevance, with seminal older works included where they were

foundational (e.g., Fisher & Ury, 1981; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). In addition to scholarly articles, industry guidelines from bodies such as the International Ombuds Association (2022) were reviewed to incorporate practical insights into the evolving standards of professional practice.

Analytical Approach

The selected literature was critically analyzed through thematic coding. Articles and reports were evaluated for recurring themes, including potential advantages of AI, risks related to trust and ethics, gaps in current research, and proposed hybrid models. Rather than merely summarizing sources, the analysis synthesized findings across multiple perspectives, identifying points of convergence, debate, and omission.

Particular emphasis was placed on evaluating not just the technical claims made about AI's capacities, but also the ethical, relational, and procedural implications for ombudsman practice. Where possible, contrasting viewpoints were highlighted to present a balanced and nuanced discussion.

Writing Process

The writing process proceeded iteratively, beginning with an outline shaped by the major themes that emerged from the literature. Each section of the paper was drafted to progress logically from context setting to critical analysis, culminating in a set of strategies and recommendations for the responsible integration of AI into ombudsman services. Throughout the writing process, AI-assisted tools were used selectively to support citation management, grammar refinement (e.g., Grammarly), and the organization of initial ideas. However, critical evaluation, conceptual synthesis, argument development, and final drafting were conducted manually to ensure intellectual rigor and maintain an authentic scholarly voice.

Discussion

Core Question

The integration of artificial intelligence into ombudsman services raises a fundamental question:

To what extent can AI enhance or hinder the effectiveness and ethical integrity of the ombudsman's role in organizational or governmental dispute resolution?

As outlined earlier, this question can be examined through three interrelated lenses: whether AI can meaningfully improve the efficiency and consistency of ombudsman operations; what ethical and practical risks it introduces when applied to informal conflict resolution; and how a hybrid model might strike the right balance between automation and human-centered judgment.

This discussion section draws together the findings and frameworks introduced earlier to evaluate those dimensions critically and cohesively. Rather than revisiting each topic in isolation, the following analysis explores the broader themes that emerge from the literature, such as gaps in research, risks and opportunities, legal and regulatory frameworks, and strategic integration models. Together, these themes inform a nuanced answer to the core question: AI has the potential to augment ombudsman practice, but only when carefully designed to align with the profession's relational, ethical, and procedural foundations.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research, several notable gaps remain in the existing literature on AI integration into ombudsman services:

1. Few studies have specifically examined the application of AI in corporate ombuds functions, where informal, confidential, and trust-based conflict resolution differs significantly from formal legal processes or traditional HR models. Much of the current research focuses broadly on AI applications in legal technology, online dispute resolution (ODR), or HR case management systems, leaving the unique relational and ethical dynamics of organizational ombuds work largely underexplored (Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017; Johnson, 2023).
2. There is a lack of empirical research on hybrid AI-human ombudsman models. While scholars such as Leung (2022) and Williams and Young (2021) emphasize the importance of maintaining empathy, transparency, and human oversight, few studies have tested how hybrid approaches function operationally or impact user trust and satisfaction over time. This leaves practitioners without clear evidence-based guidance for structuring effective hybrid systems.
3. The legal and regulatory frameworks necessary to support AI-powered ombudsman services remain underdeveloped. As Susskind (2019) observes, technological innovation often outpaces regulatory adaptation, creating uncertainty around as confidentiality protections, due process rights, explainability of decisions, and organizational liability for AI-driven outcomes. These unresolved legal questions are particularly acute in the ombudsman context, where confidentiality and neutrality are both legal and ethical imperatives.
4. There is limited exploration of AI's integration across diverse organizational settings. Most available studies focus either on public-sector applications or generalized commercial Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) models, with little attention to specific sectors such as academia, healthcare, or global corporations, where cultural variation, legal obligations, and organizational hierarchies may shape conflict dynamics differently (Losey, 2024; Berendt, 2022).

Addressing these gaps will be critical for the future potential of AI integration into ombudsman services and would strengthen, rather than undermine, core ethical and relational foundations. Yet even with additional research, serious risks remain inherent in the technological augmentation of human-centered conflict resolution systems.

Risks of AI

Understanding the gaps is essential, but so too is confronting the inherent risks posed by AI integration. The following analysis examines the emotional, ethical, and procedural vulnerabilities that AI introduces into ombudsman practice, highlighting tensions that must be carefully navigated to maintain trust and legitimacy.

The literature identifies several significant risks associated with the use of AI in conflict resolution settings, particularly within the context of ombudsman services. These risks are not merely technical challenges but reflect deeper tensions between the operational logic of automation and the relational imperatives of conflict engagement.

One major concern is the empathy gap. AI systems, even those enhanced with sentiment analysis capabilities, fundamentally lack the capacity for genuine emotional intelligence. As Ahmad (2025) and Leung (2022) highlight, AI tools cannot interpret nuanced emotional states, cultural sensitivities, or nonverbal communication, which are often crucial in resolving workplace conflicts involving trauma, discrimination, or interpersonal grievances. Overreliance on AI in emotionally charged cases could produce interactions that feel impersonal or

invalidating, thus undermining the psychological safety and trust that ombudsmen are tasked with cultivating.

Closely related to these concerns are data privacy and ethical design considerations. Effective AI tools often require the collection and analysis of large volumes of sensitive data, which raises critical questions about confidentiality. Without rigorous data protection protocols and transparent ethical frameworks, there is an elevated risk of breaches, misuse, or unauthorized disclosure of confidential information (Berendt, 2022; Barfield & Pagallo, 2018). Such breaches would not only harm individuals but could irreparably damage the credibility of ombudsman services.

Another persistent danger is algorithmic bias and cultural insensitivity. AI systems trained on historical datasets may inadvertently reproduce or even exacerbate systemic inequalities embedded in the data (Barocas, Hardt, & Narayanan, 2019). In multicultural workplaces, where perceptions of fairness are highly sensitive, algorithmically generated outcomes that reflect unconscious bias may exacerbate tensions and reinforce marginalization, rather than promoting resolution.

Finally, concerns about confidentiality breaches—whether technical (through cybersecurity flaws) or perceptual (if users distrust the AI process)—pose a direct threat to the ombudsman model. Trust in the confidentiality of the process is foundational to encouraging candid disclosures. Researchers note that even a small perceived risk of data leakage could discourage individuals from seeking assistance, compromising the ombudsman's accessibility and effectiveness (Losey, 2024; National Ombudsman Association, 2021).

Collectively, these risks suggest that successful integration of AI into ombudsman work will require more than technological sophistication. It requires a sustained ethical commitment to protecting the relational and trust-based foundations of the role, accompanied by robust oversight mechanisms, user education, and clear human accountability structures.

Potential Advantages of AI

While the risks associated with AI integration into ombudsman work are substantial, the potential advantages also warrant serious consideration. Thoughtfully implemented, AI technologies could augment human capacity, address longstanding structural challenges, and expand access to conflict resolution services in ways that align with principles of organizational justice.

One of the most often-cited advantages of AI in dispute resolution settings is operational efficiency. AI systems can offer significant improvements in speed, scalability, and accessibility, enabling ombudsman offices to process a higher volume of cases with greater consistency and faster response times (Johnson, 2023; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). By automating routine tasks such as case intake, initial triage, and trend analysis, AI could free human ombudsmen to focus on more complex, relational aspects of conflict resolution. Moreover, AI's capacity for 24/7 accessibility holds promise for global organizations with distributed workforces across multiple time zones, improving responsiveness and reach.

Another significant potential benefit is the enhancement of objectivity and consistency. Human decision-making is inherently subject to unconscious bias, mood variability, and cognitive limitations. When properly designed, AI systems —particularly those incorporating transparent algorithms and regular bias audits —can help mitigate these inconsistencies by standardizing case handling at the early stages (Raji et al., 2020; Berendt, 2022). While AI alone cannot ensure fairness, structured data analysis may support ombudsman offices in identifying

systemic patterns of conflict, surfacing hidden inequities, and offering more equitable service delivery across diverse populations.

Cost savings and resource efficiency are also frequently noted advantages. Implementing AI solutions has the potential to reduce administrative burdens, allowing organizations to expand conflict resolution offerings without proportionally increasing personnel costs (Berendt, 2022; Lee, 2022). Particularly for organizations where ombuds offices are underfunded or under-resourced, AI-supported systems could offer a means to sustain or enhance services without undermining quality, provided that human oversight remains integral to the model.

The evolving legal and regulatory landscape offers both challenges and opportunities for AI-powered ombudsman models. As Susskind (2019) argues, new policies and standards will be essential to ensure that AI-enhanced dispute resolution processes meet standards of due process, confidentiality, and accountability. Emerging ethical guidelines from professional associations, such as the International Ombuds Association (2022), suggest that the use of AI must align with the foundational values of independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality. Organizations that proactively integrate these ethical considerations into their AI governance frameworks may not only reduce legal risk but also position themselves as leaders in responsible innovation within the workplace justice ecosystem.

However, realizing these advantages will depend critically on how AI is implemented, monitored, and integrated with human judgment and decision-making. Efficiency gains must not come at the cost of ethical erosion; instead, they must support and amplify the relational and trust-based foundations that define effective ombudsman services.

Moral, Legal, and Regulatory Frameworks

The introduction of AI into ombudsman services challenges traditional legal assumptions about confidentiality, due process, liability, and informed consent. As Susskind (2019) notes, technological innovation often outpaces regulatory frameworks, leaving early adopters vulnerable to unforeseen legal consequences. In the context of ombudsman work, where confidentiality and neutrality are legally protected and ethically paramount, this gap creates a high-stakes environment that demands careful navigation.

Confidentiality protections must be explicitly addressed in any AI-augmented ombudsman model. AI systems that collect, store, or analyze sensitive information must comply not only with internal confidentiality agreements but also with broader data protection laws, such as the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States or the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union. Any ambiguity regarding who has access to case data, how it is secured, and under what circumstances it could be disclosed could erode trust in ombuds services (Berendt, 2022; Barfield & Pagallo, 2018).

In addition to confidentiality, due process rights must be safeguarded. Ombudsman services are designed to be informal; however, the integration of AI raises concerns about transparency and appealability, particularly in the triaging or recommending of actions. Individuals engaging with an AI-assisted ombudsman must understand how algorithmic processes influence decisions and must have clear, accessible pathways to request human review or intervention when necessary (Raji et al., 2020; Williams & Young, 2021). Failure to provide such mechanisms risks not only fairness but also potential legal challenges related to procedural justice.

Liability structures must also be clarified. If an AI system mishandles a case—through misclassification, biased pattern detection, or data breach—it is critical to determine who holds

responsibility: the ombuds office, the organization, the AI vendor, or a combination thereof. Current legal scholarship suggests that ombuds offices must retain final accountability for all AI-assisted actions, even if tasks are partially automated (Susskind, 2019; International Ombuds Association, 2022).

Finally, informed consent practices must evolve. Individuals engaging with AI-supported ombudsman services must be advised that AI is involved, what its role is, what data it accesses, and their rights regarding opt-out or escalation to a human ombudsman. Transparency at the outset is crucial for maintaining ethical integrity and ensuring legal defensibility.

Emerging ethical guidelines, such as those proposed by the International Ombuds Association (2022), call for AI deployments that align with the foundational values of independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality. To operationalize these principles, organizations must embed legal compliance into the design, deployment, and governance of AI-assisted ombuds services from the outset, not as an afterthought.

The legal viability of AI-powered ombudsman models depends on proactively designing systems that protect confidentiality, ensure procedural fairness, establish clear accountability, and secure meaningful informed consent—all while preserving the trust-based character that defines ombudsman work.

Strategies for Integrating AI-Powered Ombudsman Services

Given the ethical, legal, and relational complexities surrounding the integration of AI into ombudsman services, any implementation strategy must be guided by clear principles and designed to preserve the foundational values of the profession. Without such intentional design, efforts to incorporate AI risk undermine the very qualities that make ombuds services effective: trust, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality.

Guiding Principles

Emerging recommendations from the International Ombuds Association (2022) emphasize that AI tools must explicitly align with the core values defining ombudsman practice. Chief among these is the principle of neutrality: AI systems must be designed to avoid bias ~~not only~~ in their algorithms and in their operational deployment. Regular fairness audits, diverse training datasets, and the availability of human override mechanisms are essential safeguards to uphold this value (Raji et al., 2020; Barocas, Hardt, & Narayanan, 2019).

Confidentiality must also be non-negotiable. AI systems involved in ombuds work should minimize data retention wherever possible, limit access to sensitive information, and implement encryption and privacy-by-design architectures to ensure confidentiality is not compromised (Berendt, 2022; Barfield & Pagallo, 2018). Human oversight must be embedded at every critical decision point, ensuring that ethical judgments, contextual understanding, and discretionary flexibility remain central to the process.

Finally, accountability must be delineated. Human ombuds professionals must retain ultimate responsibility for all AI-supported actions, reinforcing trust in the institution and ensuring that individuals have recourse to human judgment at every stage (International Ombuds Association, 2022).

Conceptualizing AI in Ombudsman Services

A thoughtful hybrid model could leverage AI's strengths while preserving human-centered relational work. This model could include four key components:

- AI-assisted case intake and triage: AI systems could manage the initial intake of concerns, guiding individuals through structured questionnaires and flagging high-risk or complex cases for immediate human review. Pattern recognition algorithms could help identify systemic issues early, enhancing organizational responsiveness (Johnson, 2023; Lee, 2022).
- AI-powered dispute resolution recommendations: For low-complexity cases, such as procedural misunderstandings or simple workplace disputes, AI can suggest resolution pathways based on prior similar cases, providing parties with a menu of options. These recommendations would remain non-binding and serve only as preliminary resources, with clear communication that final decisions rest with human ombuds oversight (Losey, 2024; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017).
- Human ombudsman feedback, contextualization, and approval: The critical role of the human ombudsman in interpreting AI-generated outputs is essential to the model. Human professionals must assess the recommendations within the specific relational, emotional, and organizational context, ensuring that solutions are both procedurally sound and psychologically and culturally appropriate (Leung, 2022).
- Feedback loops for fairness, transparency, and appeal: Ongoing monitoring systems must be built into the process, allowing the stakeholders to provide feedback on their experiences and perceptions of fairness. Internal reviews should track patterns in AI-supported resolutions to ensure no systemic biases emerge. Users must also retain the right to request full human handling of their concerns at any point in the process.

By anchoring AI augmentation within a framework of human oversight, ethical vigilance, and relational care, organizations can harness the technology efficiencies without compromising the integrity of ombudsman work. Ultimately, AI should be viewed not as a substitute for human judgment, but as a tool that, when carefully governed, can expand access to justice, surface systemic patterns of harm, and allow human ombuds professionals to focus their energies where they are most needed: in the relational heart of conflict resolution.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the potential of an AI-powered ombudsman, weighing its promise and its perils. While AI offers tools for efficiency and accessibility, it simultaneously raises serious concerns about neutrality, confidentiality, and independence. The literature suggests that without robust ethical safeguards, AI integration may undermine the very legitimacy of the ombudsman.

The integration of artificial intelligence into ombudsman services presents both significant opportunities and substantial risks. This paper has examined whether AI-powered tools can enhance the effectiveness of organizational ombuds functions without undermining their core values of neutrality, confidentiality, independence, and informality. While AI holds promise for improving efficiency, accessibility, and the identification of systemic patterns, it also raises critical concerns about emotional intelligence, data privacy, algorithmic fairness, and procedural justice. Meeting these challenges requires more than technical sophistication—it demands principled leadership, strong ethical guardrails, and a commitment to preserving the relational trust that defines ombudsman practice.

The paper concludes that AI should not be viewed as a replacement but as a complement to human judgment. The challenge ahead is to balance innovation with ethical integrity, ensuring that the ombudsman remains both relevant and trusted in the digital age. Without robust ethical safeguards, AI integration may undermine the very legitimacy of the ombudsman.

Limitations of the Study

This paper is subject to several important limitations. First, the research is theoretical in scope and lacks empirical testing or primary data collection. As a result, while the analysis offers conceptual insights and proposes strategic frameworks, it cannot validate the practical effectiveness of hybrid AI-human models through direct observation or user feedback.

Second, there is limited data on the current use of AI within ombuds offices. Much of the existing literature focuses on adjacent fields such as online dispute resolution (ODR) and human resources case management. Consequently, recommendations are based on related domains rather than ~~on~~ direct evidence from ombudsman-specific implementations.

Finally, the rapid pace of AI development may render parts of this study outdated. Technologies, ethical standards, and regulatory frameworks in AI-assisted conflict resolution are evolving quickly, which may lead to shifts in best practices over time. As such, some of the strategic recommendations outlined here may require revision as technological capabilities, societal expectations, and legal standards continue to develop.

The study aims to provide a foundation for future research, practical experimentation, and policy development. These efforts can help refine and validate responsible models for integrating AI into ombudsman services—while fully acknowledging the limitations noted above.

Main Key Ethical and Policy Considerations

The successful integration of artificial intelligence into ombudsman services depends not only on technical capabilities but also on alignment with the ethical principles that define ombudsman practice. Three ethical and policy considerations are especially critical: maintaining confidentiality and data security, ensuring transparency and accountability, and addressing bias and fairness.

1. Confidentiality and Data Security

Confidentiality is a cornerstone of the ombudsman role. However, AI systems often rely on collecting and analyzing large amounts of sensitive data, raising concerns about how securely information is stored, processed, and shared. Data breaches, unauthorized access, or unclear data ownership policies could seriously undermine trust in AI-assisted systems. As Berendt (2022) and Barfield and Pagallo (2018) note, maintaining compliance with data protection laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) is necessary but not sufficient. Ombudsman offices must go further by ensuring privacy-by-design architecture, implementing role-based access restrictions, and minimizing unnecessary data retention.

2. Transparency and Accountability

Transparency in AI-assisted decision-making is vital for maintaining user trust and procedural fairness. In traditional ombuds processes, individuals have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions or challenge perceived misunderstandings. When AI tools are involved in intake, classification, or even in recommending resolution pathways, the logic behind those decisions must be explainable. Otherwise, parties may view the process as opaque or arbitrary. Researchers such as Raji et al. (2020) and Williams and Young (2021) emphasize the need for explainable AI (XAI) models and the importance of offering users an accessible pathway for appeal or human review. Moreover, legal liability must be clearly defined. In cases of misclassification, algorithmic bias, or confidentiality failures, organizations must determine

whether responsibility lies with the ombuds office, the AI vendor, or another stakeholder. (Susskind, 2019).

3. Bias and Fairness

AI systems are only as fair as the data used to train them. Numerous studies have shown that machine learning models can inadvertently reinforce historical discrimination and structural inequality if not properly audited (Barocas, Hardt, & Narayanan, 2019). This risk is especially problematic in ombudsman contexts, where perceived neutrality and cultural competence are essential. As Binns (2018) and Leung (2022) argue, fairness in automated systems is not simply a technical challenge but a philosophical and organizational one. Tools must be audited regularly for algorithmic bias, and training data should reflect the diversity of the populations served. Organizations should also implement mechanisms for human override, cultural review, and stakeholder feedback to ensure that AI-driven processes uphold equity and respect for all participants.

Taken together, these three considerations, confidentiality, transparency, and fairness, form the ethical backbone of any responsible AI deployment in ombudsman services. Ignoring them risks not only technical failure but also the erosion of trust, legitimacy, and the very purpose of the ombuds office.

Practical Applications and Policy Implications

The integration of AI into ombudsman services holds promise in workplace contexts where traditional models may fall short due to scale, complexity, or geographic dispersion. While the ethical risks of AI remain pressing, certain industries and organizational environments are especially well-positioned to benefit from hybrid AI-human ombudsman systems. This is true provided they are implemented with strong safeguards.

1. Industries and Workplace Environments Best Suited for AI-Enhanced Ombuds Services.

Highly regulated, data-rich, or fast-moving industries often face internal conflict dynamics that require scalable and efficient resolution mechanisms. Sectors such as healthcare, higher education, finance, and technology frequently manage complex interpersonal and systemic issues that could benefit from AI-supported trend detection, intake triage, and early resolution tools (Lee, 2022; Johnson, 2023). Additionally, organizations that already use digital infrastructure for HR or compliance are more likely to have the technological maturity needed to support secure AI implementation. However, success in these contexts still hinges on organizational culture and commitment to human oversight and ethical standards.

2. Global Companies with Distributed Teams.

Multinational organizations operating across multiple time zones and cultural contexts face inherent challenges. These include delivering timely, accessible, and culturally responsive ombuds services. AI tools can help bridge these gaps by offering 24/7 intake availability, multilingual interfaces, and initial case categorization to support equitable service delivery across locations (Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). By standardizing intake procedures and helping surface patterns across regions, AI systems may also assist global ombuds teams in detecting systemic issues more effectively. However, policy implications include ensuring that local data privacy laws (e.g., GDPR) are respected and that AI tools are adapted for cultural nuance and equity.

3. Organizations Managing High Dispute Volume.

Large institutions—such as universities, hospital networks, and government agencies—often face a high volume of complaints, many of which involve recurring or low-complexity issues. In such settings, AI can serve as a first-line support system, handling intake, classifying concerns, and recommending interventions based on historical patterns (Berendt, 2022; Losey, 2024). This enables human ombuds practitioners to focus ~~their efforts~~ on complex, emotionally charged, or high-impact cases. Policy considerations for high-volume organizations should include developing clear escalation protocols, maintaining transparency about AI's role in the process, and ensuring user trust through informed consent and opt-out mechanisms (Susskind, 2019; International Ombuds Association, 2022).

In these contexts, policy frameworks must be tailored to define when and how AI is used, establish accountability, and ensure that the core values of confidentiality, neutrality, and informality remain intact. With proper guardrails, AI-enhanced ombudsman systems can serve as a valuable resource, not to replace human expertise but to extend its reach and impact in today's complex workplace environments.

Future Directions

As AI continues to evolve, conflict resolution—and ombudsman practice in particular—stands at a critical juncture. While this paper outlines the theoretical benefits and risks of AI integration, further research, policy development, and field experimentation will be essential to validate and refine the proposed hybrid model.

Several future directions warrant particular attention:

First, pilot studies of AI-enhanced ombudsman programs in real organizational settings are needed to test the functionality, user trust, and ethical safeguards of hybrid models. These pilots should evaluate case volume and resolution speed, user satisfaction, perceived fairness, and the impact on the ombudsman's credibility. Ideally, such studies would include a variety of sectors, such as higher education, healthcare, and multinational corporations, to assess adaptability across contexts.

Second, interviews and surveys focused on trust, cultural sensitivity, and fairness in AI-supported ombuds interactions would offer important qualitative insights. These tools could help illuminate how different populations perceive AI involvement in informal dispute processes, shed light on how different populations perceive AI involvement, particularly among underrepresented or historically marginalized groups who may already be skeptical of automated systems (Leung, 2022; Williams & Young, 2021).

Third, professional training and capacity-building initiatives should be developed to equip ombudsman professionals with foundational knowledge in AI ethical standards, data governance, and algorithmic bias. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into workplace systems, ombudsman practitioners must be prepared to participate meaningfully in the design, deployment, and oversight of AI tools (Raji et al., 2020).

Finally, collaboration with policy-makers and professional associations will be vital in shaping standards, safeguards, and shared best practices. Organizations such as the International Ombuds Association (2022) and the United States Ombudsman Association can play a central role in convening cross-sector dialogue and guidelines that ensure AI is used in a manner consistent with the core values of independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality.

By investing in these next steps, the field can move from conceptual exploration toward responsible innovation, ensuring that technology enhances, rather than erodes, the trust-based, human-centered foundations of ombudsman services.

This paper demonstrated that while AI offers promising enhancements to ombudsman services, such as improved efficiency, scalability, and pattern recognition, it presents ethical and relational challenges that cannot be overlooked. Through a comprehensive review of the literature, theoretical frameworks, and proposed implementation strategies, the study concludes that a carefully designed hybrid model is the most viable path forward. Future research and pilot programs will be essential to refine this model, ensure regulatory compliance, and protect the core values that make ombudsman work effective, human-centered, and trusted.

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Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges the use of Grammarly and ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) for editorial refinement, grammar support, and citation management during manuscript preparation. All analyses, interpretations, and intellectual contributions are solely the author's.

Appendix
Ombudsman Intake Process Using AI

Purpose:

This process is designed to provide a confidential, transparent, and ethical way for students to report concerns, complaints, or feedback regarding the AI Teaching Assistant (AI-TA) interactions in the course. This system ensures that any issues are handled with integrity, empathy, and professionalism while maintaining student privacy.

1. Intake Process Overview

The AI-powered intake process allows students to submit concerns related to their interactions with the AI-TA, including but not limited to AI bias, feedback quality, perceived miscommunications, or any other academic-related complaints. The process is structured to ensure that complaints are received, reviewed, and addressed in a timely and ethical manner.

2. AI-Powered Complaint Intake Tool

Platform: Students will access a secure online intake tool integrated within the course's learning management system (LMS), such as Canvas, or through a dedicated form platform.

Guided Process: The AI system will prompt students through a series of questions, providing an empathetic tone and ensuring the student's experience is captured accurately. These prompts are designed to allow students to detail their concerns, with questions such as:

AI Questions:

"Please describe the issue or concern you are experiencing."
"Was the AI-TA involved? If yes, how?"
"How did this issue affect your academic progress or experience?"
"Would you prefer to remain anonymous in this process?"
"Have you shared this concern with a faculty member or T?"

3. Categorization and Escalation

The AI system will analyze the responses and categorize the issue (e.g., bias, inaccuracy, communication error, etc.).

Escalation Process: Once categorized, the complaint will be automatically directed to a human ombudsman (designated faculty member or ethics officer) for review.

For sensitive or complex issues, human oversight will be immediately initiated, ensuring that ethical and legal considerations are met.

4. Confidentiality and Data Protection

Confidentiality: All submissions are kept confidential, ensuring no identification of the student unless explicitly requested. The intake form is designed to allow for anonymous submissions.

Data Protection: The AI tool will comply with institutional privacy standards (e.g., FERPA in the U.S.) and ensure that all data handling aligns with ethical and legal requirements.

Outcome Tracking: Students will have the option to receive updates on the progress of their complaint resolution, with clear timelines and explanations.

5. AI System's Role in Feedback and Resolution

The AI system will provide students with a confirmation of their complaint submission.

AI will provide an acknowledgment that their concern is being reviewed and outline the next steps.
AI may offer follow-up prompts for further clarification if needed.

6. Feedback and Continuous Improvement

After a resolution has been achieved, students will be invited to complete a brief, confidential survey evaluating the intake process, feedback clarity, and the fairness of the resolution. This feedback will be used to enhance both the AI-TA system and the complaint resolution process.

Confidentiality Commitment:

This intake process is designed to uphold the highest standards of confidentiality, ethical integrity, and academic fairness. The information submitted through this system will only be used to address student concerns and improve the overall learning experience with the AI-TA.