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Message from the Ombudsperson

The year 2020 was extraordinary. A global pandemic upended life as we knew it, resulting in widespread loss and suffering. More than a year on, challenges persist as we continue adjusting to different ways of living, working, and connecting while caring for ourselves and our families. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) introduced us to a new world, but it has also helped us discover our potential for adaptation, innovation, resilience, and transformational change. At every level, there are reasons for optimism and hope.
The ombudsperson’s role does not come with a guidebook. Nothing could have prepared me for what transpired in my third year at the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Yet, I have never been prouder to be a member of an organization that not only swung into action with extraordinary COVID-19 response and recovery initiatives but also took significant steps to prioritize the protection, health, and safety of the entire ADB community while maintaining its unwavering commitment to development work.

I am also proud to work with the incredibly dedicated group of individuals in the ombuds team who prioritized serving the ADB community even as they dealt with transitions and battled disruptions during an intensely stressful year. The Office of the Ombudsperson worked on reimagining our annual report and creating a new and innovative virtual initiative while never once losing sight of our mission to provide a safe, confidential place where people can express themselves freely and feel understood without judgment. I am pleased to conclude my third year by presenting this latest report on our activities.

We managed 515 cases in 2020, marking a 4% increase from the previous year. The issues raised by those who sought our office’s assistance and the trends and patterns of concerns we observed were not entirely new to the office. But 2020 reflected a 226% increase in cases related to safety, health, and physical environment. The significant escalation in issues related to work–life balance, mental well-being, workload, and organizational climate is disconcerting, and these can be attributable to the pandemic. Should these concerns persist and be left unaddressed, we risk staff burnout. In addition, future work outcomes could potentially be affected, generating profound consequences to the entire ADB community.

As in previous years, more women than men contacted our office for assistance. Nevertheless, the number of women inquirers more than doubled the number of men in 2020, reflecting detrimental, global trends in women’s experiences of working from home and the disproportionate gender gaps impacting work outcomes.

Although those who seek help from our office make up a small percentage of the wider ADB community, I am confident that the trends and patterns discussed in this report are representative of issues faced at large.

Established only 9 years ago, the Office of the Ombudsperson has forged a strong relationship of trust with the ADB community. Our office is motivated by
the confidence and support of our colleagues. We value every discussion as it helps us identify concerns and craft recommendations toward improving ADB’s work environment and organizational culture.

We are also inspired by ADB’s response to our office’s recommendations and discussions regarding organizational change and mental well-being. Likewise, we are heartened by the seriousness with which ADB reacted to the increasing instances of domestic abuse that our office learned of in 2020.

As a neutral and independent office, our role is to educate and support the ADB community. We are committed to innovation. We continually ask ourselves how we can improve

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### 2020 Year at a Glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASES</th>
<th>ISSUES</th>
<th>ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS</th>
<th>INITIATIVES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>515</td>
<td>1,843</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
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**CASES**
- 4% increase from 2019
- 73% initiated by women
- 82% originated from ADB HQ
- 45% raised by international staff

**ISSUES**
1. Safety, Health, and Physical Environment (226% increase)
2. Concerns Regarding Supervision
3. Organizational Climate

**ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS**
- 18 Outreach sessions
- 27 Internal knowledge sharing events
- 27 External knowledge sharing events
- 32 Meetings with external ombuds
- 30 OOMP staff learning activities

**INITIATIVES**
- Reimagined the annual report
- Served as Staff Welfare and Recreation Committee for the Office of the President
- Upgraded the Case Management System
or reinvent our work, which is recognized both internally within ADB and externally by other organizations that turn to us for inventive ideas and creative solutions. The Office of the Ombudsperson has worked persistently to maintain its mission to be an innovative creator, overcoming the limitations of the pandemic to reimagine and expand our messaging.

We see our annual report as a tool to educate the ADB community and support organizational cultural change. In the past year, we have redesigned our annual report and are continuing the trend this year. We have also begun work on redeveloping and revamping our SharePoint hub site.

Another goal of the Office of the Ombudsperson is to address staff concerns at field offices. The pandemic unexpectedly halted our targeted in-person outreach strategy for field offices. Although we quickly adapted to a virtual form of outreach, we consider this an interim strategy until it is possible to pick up where we left off in early 2020. The gap will allow us to rethink our processes and let creativity guide our next approach. Unfortunately, there was a 62% decline in cases from field offices this year. We find this problematic since it reflects a reversal of gains made before the pandemic.

The Office of the Ombudsperson continues to make a mark in the ADB community through its quiet leadership, working behind the scenes to support Management and making employee and management concerns a priority. We remain steadfast in our commitment to collaborate with relevant decision-makers to address systemic issues.

As a confidential, informal, neutral, and independent office, we help prevent and manage disputes using different tools and cultivate more effective and resourceful ways of handling work relationships. We believe that by doing so, we are contributing to meaningful experiences in the workplace and, ultimately, to ADB’s ability to reinforce the One ADB approach set out in Strategy 2030.

In closing, I want to express my gratitude for the opportunity to serve the ADB community and for the trust placed in my leadership. I appreciate the support given to the Office of the Ombudsperson and to me personally. I will continue to do my best to be worthy of such support and collaboration.

Wayne Blair
Ombudsperson
The Asian Development Bank (ADB) established the Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP or the Ombuds Office) on 27 April 2011 through Administrative Order 2.14. In doing so, ADB joined an increasing number of organizations that find considerable benefits in providing staff with informal resources to help prevent and manage workplace conflicts.
The Office of the Ombudsperson is a confidential, informal, and neutral resource with a unique level of autonomy due to its independence from other parts of the organizational structure. We adhere to the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA). The ombudsperson provides analysis, relevant and timely advice, and upward feedback to the President and the Management team and, as needed, to members of the Board of Directors. Observations about trends and patterns of conflict and conflict management practices within the organization are also shared with managers, supervisors, and the entire ADB community.

Our Guiding Principles

The IOA Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics are the values that direct us; however, the ombuds team and ADB’s organizational culture define the way we practice.

Consequently, our guiding principles are deeply personal to the Ombuds Office (Figure 1). We are strongly committed to treating everyone with the same level of dignity and respect. We also believe that honesty and candid feedback inculcate trust and make our office more approachable. We aim to empower colleagues by helping them reframe issues and find creative ways out of their problems. Some members of the ADB community have expressed their willingness and confidence to approach us with complex and sensitive matters. They expect empathy, honest discussions, advice, and strategic solutions; they feel assured they will not be turned away.

Figure 1: Guiding Principles of the Office of the Ombudsperson

For the Ombuds Office, no concern is too insignificant. However, it is important to note that there are occasions or cases where we cannot be an individual’s ombudsperson. Still, we benefit from each conversation and consider each consultation a learning opportunity for us and the organization.

**What We Can Do**

- Practice active listening without judgment.
- Conduct conflict analysis and conflict mapping.
- Provide guidance on problem-solving and assist in strategizing the next steps.
- Conduct informal information gathering or fact-finding.
- Conduct informal mediation.
- Facilitate difficult conversations.
- Shuttle diplomacy.
- Move information between parties who may not know who the other is.
- Offer executive, negotiation, team, and conflict management coaching.
- Provide training on conflict management, when requested.
- Help build a risk-aware culture and recommend changes to address systemic organizational issues.

**What We Cannot Do**

- Create policies.
- Conduct formal investigations.
- Offer legal advice.
- Provide psychological counselling.
- Participate in formal processes.
- Overrule decisions of those that have the authority to make them.
- Serve as an advocate.

The Ombuds Office arranges confidential meetings at a time, venue, or virtual platform convenient and safe for the concerned members of the ADB community. Appointments can be scheduled over the phone, Viber, WhatsApp, or text messages. Sharing confidential or sensitive issues over e-mail and/or via Microsoft Teams is greatly discouraged as OOMP cannot guarantee the confidentiality of information relayed electronically.

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1 The OOMP jurisdiction, in some instances, does not extend to all members of the ADB community—e.g., in the case of ADB affiliates or the employer of contractors, to name a few.
Data Speak: An Analysis of Cases in 2020

The Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP or the Ombuds Office) compiles aggregate data and other findings to identify and analyze trends and problem areas that may require attention. The Ombuds Office shares this information with the ADB Management and other decision-makers to resolve systemic issues and recommend institutional changes without disclosing its sources.

Since the office’s review of its database and case management methodology in 2019, OOMP had changed how it gathers, interprets, and evaluates data and other findings to reflect the scope of its activities more accurately. The office will continue to present its analysis of trends and emerging patterns of concerns by the number of cases instead of the number of visits the office received. As such, comparative analysis of some data will be limited to a 2-year trend covering 2019 and 2020 only.
Overview of Cases

In 2020, OOMP dealt with 515 cases involving approximately 576 members of the ADB community who raised over 1,843 concerns; this represents a 4% increase in the number of cases from 2019 (Figure 2).

Notably, there was a decrease in cases involving multiple people, represented by a 31% decline in the total number of people we spoke with during the year. This indicates that several cases in 2020 focused on individual concerns rather than group issues. As always, these data do not capture numerous impromptu conversations that took place, especially during the beginning of 2020 when the ADB headquarters was still open. During the lockdowns, individuals contacted the ombudsperson’s team by appointment only. However, there were increasing instances where spontaneous and unplanned virtual conversations were initiated through different platforms, such as Viber and WhatsApp.

It is relevant to consider that individuals may consult the office several times, and there could be multiple concerns linked to each case.

Origin of Cases

There was an initial adjustment in March 2020 as we began working remotely and transitioned to virtual meetings or phone calls. As an informal and confidential resource, OOMP
provides a safe space for the ADB community. Individuals at the headquarters and field offices felt encouraged to voice how challenges, anxieties, and uncertainties around the pandemic affected their work performance.

Aggregated data show that 82% of concerns in 2020 originated from the ADB headquarters, representing a 15% increase from 2019 (Figure 3). The number of cases originating from the field offices, on the other hand, declined by 62%—not entirely surprising, considering the pandemic. This decline corresponds with reduced in-person interactions at field offices and reinforces the importance of our outreach efforts. When travels resume, our team will pick back up where we left off in early 2020. The interim warrants more proactive virtual outreach efforts to colleagues in the field offices.

**Gender and Employment Category**

Our data from previous years indicate that women usually initiate more cases regarding workplace concerns than men. The year 2020 was no exception. In fact, this year, we had the highest ever percentage of cases initiated by women: 73% of all cases, or 376 cases out of 515. It is also worth noting that, in 2020, as the number of cases initiated by women increased by 18%, the number of cases initiated by men decreased by 24%.

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**Figure 3: Origin of Cases, 2019–2020**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headquarters</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Office</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Parties</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The “unknown” category may involve people who reached out to the Office of the Ombudsperson anonymously.

As in previous years, female international staff were the most highly represented group at the headquarters (Figure 4). These numbers may suggest women’s comfort with approaching OOMP for help. The significant rise in cases in 2020 may also indicate how women’s predicament of balancing work with additional obligations at home has been further compounded in the past year. As realities shifted, women, particularly those with children at home, lost the support systems they had come to rely on to deal with childcare and housework without sacrificing their work productivity. Women’s greater responsiveness to domestic demands and increased childcare duties resulted in blurred boundaries between work and home. Multitasking, role-switching, and work interruptions that divide their attention between family and work have added extra layers of stress for women. These may also negatively affect their productivity or quality of work.

Interestingly, male international staff raised the largest number of cases in the field offices, consistent with previous years (Figure 5).

International staff in both the headquarters and the field offices initiated almost half (45%) of the cases we managed. This upward trend in the data may suggest that supervisors faced certain pressures in ensuring their respective teams’ well-being and motivation levels. The demands of simultaneously addressing their own and their family’s
concerns about well-being may have prompted them to seek help from OOMP. It may also reflect how difficulties in aligning schedules and work hours increased as more began working from outside their duty station, adding stress for everyone involved.

**Figure 5: Cases Initiated in the ADB Field Offices by Gender and Employment Categories, 2020**

![Bar chart showing cases initiated by gender and employment categories.]

Tenure

Newcomers who have been with ADB for less than 5 years initiated 35% of the Ombuds Office’s cases in 2020 (Figure 6). Half the cases within this group came from individuals between their second and third year at ADB and nearing their confirmation date. These figures generally reveal how new staff increasingly seek our help as they struggle to adapt to ADB’s complex organizational culture. In the context of 2020, the percentage increase may also imply an additional layer to the settlement process and the challenges of adjusting to a virtual work environment.

It is also important to highlight that staff who have been with ADB for over 20 years initiated 60% more cases in 2020 than in 2019. This is also an unusual trend seen by our office. Their concerns revolved around job security and the challenges of working from home. In some cases, there was a reassessment of priorities and considerations about early retirement.

Issues and Concerns Raised

This section presents the most prominent themes brought to the attention of the Ombuds Office in 2020. Issues raised
become trends when multiple individuals seek help from the office about the same or a similar concern. Trends are, therefore, informed by OOMP data and signal an opportunity for intervention or action by the ADB Management. It is worth noting that some issues brought to OOMP reflect concerns that may be unique from the trends highlighted in the two work-from-home surveys conducted by ADB’s Budget, People, and Management Services Department (BPMSD) in 2020. The highlighted trends in this section, however, should not detract from the fact that ADB personnel generally feel the organization has been highly responsive to their needs during the pandemic. They support ADB’s mission and vision and are proud to be associated with an organization with a long history of leadership in development work in Asia and the Pacific region.

In 2020, the Ombuds Office attended to and helped address over 1,843 issues and concerns.

Figure 7 indicates that almost half of all cases our office addressed dealt with the general issue category of safety, health, and physical environment, representing a 226% increase from 2019. This category typically represents concerns, questions, and issues pertaining to working conditions, stress and well-being, accommodations for

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those with disability and health conditions, and safety- and security-related matters. In 2020, this category specifically reflected concerns about stress and anxieties during the pandemic, the challenges of working from home (in and outside the duty station), and mental well-being.

**Concerns regarding supervision** were the second-largest general issue category in 2020, covering 39% of cases in 2020. This category is followed by cases concerning **organizational climate**, with 34% of cases. Other general issue categories also increased from 2019 to 2020, such as **peer and colleague relationships** (20% of cases) and **services/administrative concerns** (19% of cases).

**Safety, health, and physical environment** was the most significant general issue category in 2020, and cases were most frequently raised by ADB headquarters personnel, particularly women. The considerable increase in cases mirrors the two work–from-home surveys released by BPMSD and implies the pandemic’s unique circumstances and consequent challenges.

Several concerns revolve around work–life balance, apprehensions regarding personal health, and worries about mental well-being (Figure 8). Additionally, the shift to telework or flexplace was significantly stressful for those who had to work in, or were working with others in, different time zones. For some, the shift to working from home threatened personal security. During this time, OOMP disturbingly
Data Speak: An Analysis of Cases in 2020

Figure 8: Issues Pertaining to Safety, Health, and Physical Environment, 2020

- Work-Related Stress and Work-Life Balance: 43%
- Mental Health: 18%
- Telework and/or Flexplace: 15%
- Physical Working and/or Living Conditions: 9%
- Safety: 8%
- Security: 2%
- Others: 5%

Note: “Others” may refer to issues that do not fall under any of the currently established categories.

received increasing domestic abuse cases when lockdown measures were in place. The United Nations has described the global escalation in domestic abuse as a “shadow pandemic” alongside COVID-19.³ Stress and disruption of social and protective networks are some reasons for the increased risks in women of suffering any form of abuse. The Ombuds Office also observed a rise in the number of individuals disclosing increased use of prescribed medication to manage mental health concerns in 2020.

Figure 9 represents the number of cases involving concerns regarding supervision. Cases under this general issue category increased by 16%, from 173 cases in 2019 to 200 in 2020. The most common concerns under this category relate to respect and/or treatment, communication, and managers seeking help.

International staff raised 58% of the concerns regarding supervision. In half of these instances, international staff, in their capacity as managers or supervisors, requested help from OOMP on how to better manage their respective teams, especially in the context of the unprecedented work situations.

in 2020. This is an unusual trend for our office. Nonetheless, it mirrors the findings of BPMSD’s work-from-home surveys, which concluded that supervisors, in general, felt that they have the expertise required to manage their teams virtually, yet faced several challenges affecting their ability to do so.

**Figure 9: Issues Pertaining to Supervision, 2020**

The Ombuds Office has received these requests from individuals in supervisory or leadership positions. Some may not necessarily hold formal supervisory or management roles but are the first point of contact in their departments for those seeking support. These individuals are faced with the dilemma of presenting a resilient façade for others and modelling positive behaviors while struggling with their personal anxieties and challenges around the pandemic.

Some of the remaining concerns raised with our office under this category also correspond with the BPMSD surveys. They reflect the reservations of staff with respect to the manner in which their supervisors or managers dealt with them during the year. The novelty of the pandemic may have represented a significant challenge in the way supervisors managed their teams. However, these managers need to consider how ineffective communication or a lack of respect for boundaries could be an additional source of stress for team members, consequently undermining their mental well-being. Moreover, working from home through virtual platforms can be perceived as perpetual availability, which can create a constant sense of urgency. Consequently, the psychological demands for those working from home in less-than-ideal physical workspaces or dealing with family
distractions and juggling multiple responsibilities could eventually lead to burnout.

Unlike previous years, organizational climate—which generally refers to how the work environment affects morale—was the third-largest category in 2020. There were 175 cases, representing a 7% decrease from 2019. Sub-issues under this category involve workplace leadership and management, group dynamics, and workload inequity, among others (Figure 10).

The pandemic has created unique circumstances and challenging working conditions globally. It has generally prompted people to focus more on their personal situations and well-being and less on organizational issues. The slight decline in cases involving organizational climate reflects this trend. However, staff morale has generally been significantly affected because of the considerable adjustments required for remote work.

Note: “Others” may refer to issues that do not fall under any of the currently established categories.
Understanding Stress as a Constant

Some of the topmost issues brought to the Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP or the Ombuds Office) in 2020 specifically relate to work-life balance, respect, managers seeking help, leadership and management, and workload inequity. Stress and mental well-being were the overlapping themes at the center of each thematic category.
Figure 11 reinforces the relationship between patterns observed in the OOMP data and through conversations with inquirers; it broadly illustrates how issues and concerns drawn from data are interconnected.

Uncertainty breeds anxiety. It is at the root of all our experiences as we continue to live through uncertain times. The pandemic has brought about changes no one could have imagined. As the year progressed, some trends persisted. Staff struggled with work–life balance and the consequent stress resulting from the gradual erosion of boundaries around the workday. They also experienced isolation due to the absence of in-person interaction among colleagues. These factors combined have taken a toll on the mental health and well-being of staff at both personal and work spheres. Each concern brought to our office seems rooted in stress and anxieties over the unknown, even though the conversations were about challenges at work or issues of a personal nature.

The types of conflicts and challenges also changed in 2020—remote work appears to have exacerbated existing communication challenges among teams. Some individuals found themselves grappling with varying levels of stress as they not only felt the burden of responsibility for other’s motivation and well-being, but they were also dealing with personal anxieties around travel bans, worries about family members, home schooling, among other concerns. While these challenges may have seemed more pronounced for

those with children at home, individuals that are single or do not have children were not immune to some detrimental impacts of working remotely during the pandemic. They may have been at greater risk of loneliness, lack of motivation, and associated mental well-being consequences.

As the year progressed, our office received increasing cases of staff complaining of burnout and lack of motivation. All complaints are indicative of the pandemic’s long-term mental health impacts such as “languishing,” described by the New York Times as “not functioning at full capacity (…) not depressed, but also not thriving.”

Issues brought to our office also relate to respect and unprofessional attitudes. These problems, if left unaddressed, could further dampen morale, undermine collaboration, and breed disrespectful and unprofessional conduct.

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Case Studies

The case studies discussed in this section reflect some trends and patterns of conflicts raised with the Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP or the Ombuds Office) in 2020. They also exhibit the application of OOMP’s standards when performing its functions to the ADB community.

Case studies are informed by trends observed during our data analysis and are meant for illustrative purposes only. They are a combination of different cases brought to the Ombuds Office during the year and do not necessarily represent any individual, department, or specific situation. Each case study concludes with the ombudsperson’s perspective—a deconstruction of the situation to identify underlying problems—and highlights the benefits of accessing OOMP’s services when managing work-related conflicts.
Who Takes Care of Me?

The Situation

In all her years at ADB, Saila has never worked from home. During workdays, she was accustomed to colleagues popping in to ask questions about tasks, share feedback, or have a chat. These brief connections energized her throughout the day. On Fridays, Saila would come in early to play a game of tennis with a colleague before work. At least once a week, she would catch up with friends at the headquarters over lunch. They would discuss work, life, and traffic woes. She enjoyed her career; her days were busy and full.

When the pandemic forced ADB personnel to work from home, eroding the traditional working day, Saila found herself at a loss to reestablish her structured routine. In addition, she struggled with the loss of boundaries. It now seemed that since her spouse and young children were at home, she had to work around everyone’s routines while straining to maintain her own.

In a snap, Saila would have to shift between a work-related task at hand and a demand for assistance from her 3-year-old. It was initially challenging to create a dedicated workstation for herself in her tiny apartment. Saila had to move all her things from one makeshift workspace to another every day—sometimes several times a day. Then, just as she felt she might gain some momentum, it was time to feed someone,
Case Studies

run an errand, dash out for groceries, or clean up messes everyone left behind. She would catch up on work tasks late in the evening and sleep fitfully, unable to shake off daily stresses and anxieties about rising COVID-19 cases in the city. She missed the support of her friends and colleagues and constantly worried that there was no escaping what her life had become.

Saila began to experience the consequences of burnout. She felt depressed and distracted all the time. To make matters worse, her supervisor began complaining about her lack of attention to detail, irregular work hours, and declining productivity.

Everyone talked about how the flexibility of working from home should feel empowering. But to Saila, it only felt like a trap.

What Saila Could Do

• Seek professional help and assistance.
• Ensure self-care, as it is of paramount importance, particularly during these times.
• Reestablish and commit to maintaining appropriate boundaries between her professional responsibilities and personal obligations.
• Communicate openly and honestly with members of her family, team, and supervisors about her struggles and challenges.
• Take advantage of her leave benefits and, when doing so, commit to disconnecting while away from work.

The Ombudsperson’s Perspective

The difficulty of achieving work–life balance may be construed as the defining issue in 2020 and will continue to be in 2021. It has affected and continues to affect numerous members of the ADB community regardless of position: administrative staff, national staff, international staff, consultants, or contractors. Whether they are working from home in Manila, field offices, home country, or from another location, ADB staff and personnel face common challenges that are unequivocally associated in some form or another, directly or indirectly, with issues around mental health and well-being.

Almost everyone that came to us for help discussed feeling a high degree of anxiety and fear around the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic while working from home. Individuals admitted to being more sensitive, impatient, quick to anger,
and more confrontational in their personal and professional interactions. Often, people recognized that they felt easily triggered when faced with a difference in perspective or disagreement because, ultimately, everything felt like a personal slight, an insult, or a guise of disrespect. For some, heightened anxieties and hypersensitivities have worsened interpersonal conflicts, which might not have occurred under normal circumstances or would have been quickly diffused in person.

Concerns regarding health and safety generally seem to be similar for members of the ADB community. However, the degree of impact is diverse as that is contingent upon various individual factors, which may include, but are not limited to, the following: (i) differences in coping mechanisms; (ii) level of and access to support networks; (iii) location and availability of appropriate workspaces; (iv) challenges at home or familial responsibilities, particularly, single parenting, presence of young school-aged children, or eldercare responsibilities; and (v) spouse’s or partner’s loss of job or means of income.

People also increasingly discussed the challenges associated with workload as the year progressed. For some, working from home did not necessarily equate to flexibility. The workday increased by several hours for many when they adjusted their work schedules outside of the traditional work hours to accommodate colleagues in different time zones. Some have bitterly complained about the volume of work and unrealistic deliverable schedules. They felt timelines are set without meaningful evaluation of practicality in the current context and without reasonable regard for implications.

Perceptions of workload inequity stand in the way of a fulfilling and stress-free work experience. Some disputes may be grounded in reality, but others seemed based solely on perceptions of inequality. Under these circumstances, the supervisory and delegation skills of the managers, their communication style, and their ability to set realistic expectations are crucial.

At no point in ADB’s history have exemplary supervisory and management skills been more required. The need for what is often referred to as “soft skills” (arguably a delegitimizing term) is often emphasized. However, emotional intelligence, empathy, patience, good judgment, and common sense are equally, if not more, essential. That said, one must remain mindful that supervisors and managers at all levels are also experiencing the same degree, if not higher level, of anxiety and stress associated with working from home.
People reiterate that working from home can be surprisingly isolating, even when surrounded by family members and others. We cannot stress enough the importance of proper self-care; thus, we encourage members of the ADB community to avail of their leave benefits. All staff and personnel are entitled to this benefit. However, it is up to individuals to assert their right to disengage and disconnect during this approved time off. Supervisors, managers, and colleagues must, at the same time, commit to respecting the scheduled leave of all staff members (regardless of position or level), contractors, and consultants.

During the year, we noted an increasingly disturbing trend of “disappearing acts.” Regardless of their current physical location, position, or job level, some members of the ADB community became so overwhelmed they urgently needed to disconnect from their work and others. And so, out of a sense of self-preservation, they became “unavailable” for a while. The time away tended to range from a few hours to much longer. Our discussions with several such individuals revealed a consistent tendency towards “micro breakdowns,” culminating in emotional exhaustion and withdrawal.

We would be remiss if we do not mention the dramatic increase in 2020 of cases of domestic abuse that were brought directly to our attention. According to the World Health Organization, “violence against women tends to increase in any emergency, including epidemics.” This issue affected all levels and categories of staff, contractors, and consultants in Manila and elsewhere. All such cases brought to our attention were reported by women. As disturbing as this issue is, we are not alone. It is a global phenomenon, also noted at other international organizations.

Key Points

• The prospect of a flexible schedule and custom environment might undoubtedly be highly desirable for some but challenging for others. The constant connectivity, combined with a lack of distinction between work hours and personal time, may be perceived as a type of “unpaid overtime.”
• Women, especially those with young children at home, seem to be impacted to a greater degree by the challenging balancing act of “working from home while working for home.”

An increasing number of members of the ADB community have disclosed that they had resorted to taking anti-anxiety medications as a coping mechanism in 2020. The pandemic has shattered the perception that normal productivity levels cannot be maintained while working from home. We now know our productivity is not deterred. The challenge is for ADB to reevaluate the practice of passing on additional assignments without taking into account the current workload, thereby creating unreasonably excessive deliverables.

Our current and consistently increasing levels of workload, coupled with stress, anxiety, burnout, and other forms of well-being concerns, are not sustainable. We may end up paying the psychological and/or physiological price later. The pandemic presents opportunities for great change, and the time is right now. Managers and supervisors are encouraged to step up, think outside the box, and veer away from traditional ways of doing things. Transformational change will follow.
Caught in the Middle

The Situation

Trapp has crafted his career in ADB over several years. He rose to supervisory level some years ago. Before the pandemic, he was accustomed to a dynamic environment with face-to-face activities and frequent meetings at the headquarters. As everyone pivoted and adjusted to remote work, he prided himself on supporting his team, including flexibility options for members working in different time zones. In addition, he made sure to allow everyone the freedom to set their priorities and always made himself available to all his team members.

He believed his support would make the dispersed team feel connected. As the crisis unfolded, Trapp focused on appearing strong and modelling positive thoughts and behaviors. His goal was to be encouraging and to keep spirits up so that no one on his team would have to deal with any more than what they were already dealing with. He made frequent check-ins with individual team members and urged them to come to him with work-related and other challenges. He wanted to be the first point of contact for anyone on his team seeking advice or support through complex situations.

Remote work gave him and his staff the first insights into each other’s lives, homes, and realities. It also challenged the way they managed their work and perceived pressures around deliverables. A few months into working from home, Trapp struggles to overcome gaps in teamwork and to keep the dynamism going.
While he initially felt very productive, he is struggling to gain control over his packed schedule. He has lately begun feeling “meeting fatigue.” The stress of presenting deliverables to management according to plan while maintaining the morale of his subordinates and managing their and his family’s stress levels is now catching up with him. It has been over a year since he saw his siblings and parents. He feels deeply concerned about their well-being and worries about them all the time. His upbeat demeanor is beginning to crack under the pressure of managing so many people’s anxieties and motivation levels as they struggle to absorb the losses and shocks of the pandemic.

Trapp no longer feels as productive or disciplined as he did at the beginning of the pandemic. He wants to but is hesitant to reach out to other colleagues of similar position to discuss and compare challenges. Trapp does not want to appear as if he is not on top of everything. He also does not want to appear vulnerable in front of his team or to make them perceive that he may not have all the answers.

Recently, his team has observed that he is preoccupied, and his e-mails are curt and short. He also seems irritable and often complains about tiredness and minor ailments. At the beginning of the pandemic, he was always available to talk to everyone. Lately, though, he has been avoiding one-on-one meetings and is quieter during team meetings.

On the face of it, Trapp appears to have the ideal middle position in the organization. However, he has felt acute pressure all year to handle conflicting responsibilities and now struggles to keep his own morale going.

**What Trapp Could Do**

- Recognize that he has a problem, but also that he is not alone in this struggle.
- Seek professional help and assistance.
- Communicate his challenges to his colleagues, staff, and management.
- Delegate tasks and responsibilities.
- Set realistic boundaries around work hours.
- Practice self-care as it is of paramount importance, particularly during these times.
- Look for external support, e.g., social connections outside ADB, such as friends and family to talk to or commiserate with.
- Take leave and leave the work behind.
- Don’t allow the “role-model” attitude to intimidate. People generally are unaware of what others are going through.
The Ombudsperson’s Perspective

By the third quarter of 2020, we began noticing a marked increase in supervisors approaching the Office of the Ombudsperson for help, and the trend continues into 2021.

In this context, we use the term “supervisors” broadly. It also includes some national staff (and, on occasion, administrative staff) responsible for supervising others.

It is surprising when supervisors and managers erroneously assume that they are the only ones dealing with the challenges of these unprecedented times. Current research on global management trends during the pandemic has affirmed how middle managers are generally caught between management’s demands and supervisees’ needs. As a result of their sense of obligation to manage their teams’ morale, anxiety, mental well-being, and motivation, they have felt the greatest “crunch” during the pandemic.

Managers and supervisors tend to have a self-imposed and unrealistic expectation of being the “be-all and end-all.” Consequently, they take it upon themselves to manage and allay everyone’s anxiety and fears of the unknown and the uncertain. Supervisors need to become comfortable with the idea that it is perfectly fine not to have all the answers or predict what lies ahead.

Many supervisors and managers suffer quietly in isolation and find it difficult to share their burdens. But it does not have to be this way. Working from home or from one’s home country can be isolating and demotivating enough, especially when one perceives little meaningful support. For example, a person could be surrounded by family members and still feel isolated and unsupported. Getting external support or discussing struggles with someone who is not on the inside can help find creative solutions to problems.

Managers and supervisors fail to realize the impact of their communication style on those around them. Consciously or unconsciously, they are role modelling both positive and negative behaviors. Even under normal circumstances, managers feel obligated to find a balance between role-modelling optimism or resilience and being simply human. Speaking candidly about personal challenges could boost a sense of solidarity among staff who can also relate. Communication may not be one of our strengths at ADB, but it is essential in fostering an effective organizational climate and is even more critical during these times.
Working beyond office hours has been a practice for many, and the pandemic may have simply intensified this trend. The “always on” culture bred a toxic tendency of always being present and available, even before the pandemic. Remote work has only worsened and blurred the boundaries between work and personal life. Inabilities to switch off from work can result in a range of adverse outcomes, including higher levels of stress, negative health outcomes, interference with home life, and inability to focus on one thing at a time. Therefore, it is imperative to establish boundaries and set a reasonable schedule around the workday. The pandemic has dispersed teams around the world; therefore, in consistence with advice by BPMSD, it is crucial to decide on structured “core hours,” where teams commit to working together certain hours during the day and work flexibly and independently during others. This is an opportune moment for ADB to reflect on its current organizational culture and remote-work policy, including exploring actionable solutions that ensure staff well-being as they navigate the “new normal.”

Delegation and other management tools are not always taken advantage of. As a result, managers and supervisors often fail to set personal and professional boundaries. The pandemic may also have provided an excellent opportunity for them to empower their teams. Instead of trying to be the “doers” all the time, or the ones with all the answers, managers should inculcate trust in their team members and encourage shared responsibilities.

Key Points

- Members of the ADB community who hold supervisory, leadership, and management positions are not exempt from the stresses, anxieties, and other mental health and well-being concerns that may be attributable to the pandemic.
- Having managerial and supervisory responsibilities may intensify issues and concerns that others are also dealing with. The desire to role-model may inadvertently create pressures. Consequently, this could contribute to an additional sense of isolation, a feeling of being overwhelmed or powerless against a steady stream of problems.
- Members of the ADB community are increasingly showing signs of burnout. Many supervisors and managers openly admit to not “practicing what they preach” to their staff. They feel exempt due to their greater responsibility to uphold the efficacy and well-being of staff. They also feel obligated to set an example of resilience to subordinates and colleagues. Managers and supervisors should feel encouraged to delegate work and trust their team members’ abilities.
Respect Begets Respect

The Situation

Tildy, an ADB staff member whose work entails responding to inquiries and handling requests, had a difficult year. Her exchanges with colleagues have lately been increasingly tense and disrespectful.

Over the years, Tildy has often had to manage colleagues that are unhappy with a practice or policy that stands in the way of their requests. Her inquirers are located primarily in Manila. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many are increasingly spread out across various countries and time zones. Lately, there have been instances where her interactions over phone, e-mail, or in-person have bordered on unacceptable levels of rudeness and unprofessionalism.

Tildy is beginning to feel bullied and harassed almost daily, even by people she has known and interacted with for years. In essence, she is simply the messenger and is not part of any decision-making process, so she does not understand the backlash. It seems lately everyone is increasingly short-tempered and impatient while she works on their requests.

Some of these behaviors appear to be almost out-of-character. Yet, since the pandemic and operation of the remote work arrangements, they have become more commonplace. It seems the longer the pandemic continues,
the more intense these exchanges have become. People are becoming more and more insistent and unreasonable. Some of the exchanges have left her shaken, angry, and hurt as she strives to maintain her professionalism and cool.

Tildy finds it particularly offensive when her intelligence, professionalism, and credentials come into question during these incidents. She is especially infuriated by the behavior of her fellow citizens, who can humiliate and offend her in a way that others cannot by using demeaning and offensive language. For Tildy, this is especially disturbing because she expects greater empathy from them. Instead, she finds herself defenseless and feels she must either take the mistreatment or quit her job.

As a result, Tildy resorts to avoiding certain staff members by not responding to their inquiries. But this has created new problems. She is now perceived as inefficient or unprofessional. The issue can mushroom into a larger conflict situation if her reticence infuriates the inquirer even more and can result in heated exchanges, especially in-person.

She can empathize how the pandemic has created unique circumstances for everyone and that it is a challenging and stressful time in several ways. However, these unreasonable expectations of preferential treatment, impractical concessions, and impatience with processes or protocols seem unreasonable and border on a distorted sense of entitlement.

She is hesitant to bring it up with her supervisor, anxious she may not be heard or supported. Additionally, she is worried about the potential backlash if she does. Tildy finds herself more and more stressed and nervous at the very thought of work. She breaks down after each incident and struggles to bring back her enthusiasm and motivation for work. She does not know who to turn to.

What Tildy Could Do

• Self-awareness and self-reflection will help her understand her triggers. In turn, this will help her gain greater control during instances when she is provoked.
• It is important not to aggravate the situation. The goal is to de-escalate. Such situations can be challenging since it depends on the context or how one is treated.
• People need to be able to clearly express their discomfort with being spoken to inappropriately and unprofessionally.
Case Studies

- Avoid mirroring the behavior of the other. For example, she should not raise her voice to be heard.
- Be conscious of both verbal or nonverbal expressions that can elicit an emotional response in herself and in others. Remaining calm, poised, and professional is important.
- Document the incident as soon as is practical and report it to her supervisor.
- Respectfully taking a step back or disconnecting from a problematic exchange is entirely appropriate.

The Ombudsperson’s Perspective

The people who came to us for help and brought this matter to our attention were administrative staff, national staff, international staff, and contractors. While the scope of problematic interactions was different based upon the specificity of every individual’s role or rank, the feelings of humiliation, disrespect, and belittlement were common to all.

Non-ADB staff members, such as contractors, can feel especially vulnerable in these circumstances. They report a sense of disempowerment in addressing their concerns for fear of losing their jobs. The Ombuds Office saw a dramatic rise in cases and concerns around this issue in 2020. Regrettably, 2020 also saw a significant increase in cases involving complaints from external parties concerning the behavior of ADB staff members in barangays, apartment complexes, villages, and medical establishments. Most of these occurrences were in Manila.

We understand the factors contributing to some of these reported undesirable behaviors. We also appreciate that many of the issues we have seen this year are rooted in the anxiety, stress, fear, and uncertainties associated with the pandemic. Nevertheless, we are hard-pressed to find justification for attitudes that appear inappropriate for a member of the ADB community. Regardless of position or rank, everyone has a right to be treated with the same level of dignity, respect, and professionalism.

This concern is not new to the Ombuds Office. In fact, it is one of those “ugly” issues that consistently come up every so often over the years. It is a reality we have struggled with in ADB for quite some time. Unfortunately, when individuals approach our office for help in this regard, they are usually unlikely to permit us to address their concerns directly with the parties involved. They fear some manner of retaliation or retribution in response.
It should be considered that frontline personnel do not have all the information and are unlikely to participate in any decision-making process. In addition, people approaching service providers or frontline personnel might already be frustrated with what they perceive are overly bureaucratic or arbitrary processes. In all such instances, poor communication on either side can escalate into conflict very quickly.

The power of apology should never be underestimated. On those occasions where we spoke to staff who were the alleged perpetrators of this inappropriate behavior, they all expressed chagrin and embarrassment over their demeanor. We also noted that the members of the ADB community on the receiving end of this behavior might have instigated the incidents. Common triggers include, but are not limited to, not listening, appearing dismissive, demonstrating a lack of professional courtesy, or exhibiting passive-aggressive behavior. That said, we also need to remain mindful that the tone in e-mail conversations can sometimes be misconstrued. The emotional state of the reader, combined with their expectations, can affect the meaning readers perceive.

The imbalance of power is a vital component of this dynamic. The party on the receiving end is perceived to have less power in these exchanges and can often feel a sense of powerlessness. Conversely, the perpetrating party is considered to have more power and can often exhibit a shockingly inflated sense of entitlement.

A common theme throughout 2020 is that the pandemic has exacerbated issues that were already there. Empathy, compassion, kindness, patience, sound judgment, and common sense are the needs of the hour.

**Key Points**

- The year 2020 saw a rise in concerns from people outside of ADB voicing objections about the behavior of ADB staff.
- These exchanges elicited feelings of humiliation, disrespect, and marginalization, often contributing to heightened stress and anxiety for all parties involved.
- Members of the ADB community who experienced and reported this issue came from all levels of the organization.
- It is important to remain mindful of one’s own triggers as well as being careful not to push others’ buttons.
- Power imbalance seems to play a role in these exchanges.
- More often than not, people refused to give us permission to address the issue in a meaningful way or to address it themselves.
• These exchanges may damage professional relationships.
• It is not uncommon for all parties involved to play some role in the escalation of these exchanges.
• In all instances where genuine apologies were given or exchanged, the parties involved could walk away feeling better.
Notes to Management

These recommendations are developed through discussions with people who sought our help in 2020. They are informed by analyses of data collected from those meetings and discussions. They also incorporate some recommendations from previous annual reports that remain relevant.
The development of a comprehensive mental health and well-being support system. We would like to reiterate last year’s recommendation regarding staff well-being. The pandemic’s challenges have reinforced the need for a comprehensive mental health and well-being support system at ADB. Once again, we suggest an independent evaluation of current services in this respect, followed by developing such a support system. In Annex 1, we offer greater clarity of this concern and why we recommend this course of action in the ADB context.

A necessity for greater support and accountability.
There is a disconnect between the Management directives and the daily operations. This is a trend that warrants serious consideration of changes in the work culture. It would be advantageous to show greater support to those who have demonstrated managerial courage to think outside the box and break away from the rigid culture of deliverables. The workload imbalances and erosion of boundaries during the pandemic have reinforced the need for Management to hold supervisors accountable for not following directives. The trend of focusing on quantitative deliverables might fail to consider the human cost of goals. It could also have detrimental effects on the quality of work produced, with physiological and psychological implications for members of the ADB community. Annex 2 provides our reason and rationale for this recommendation.

Other Activities

On top of individual and group meetings to help manage work-related concerns, the Office of the Ombudsperson conducted various activities in 2020 with the following objectives, among others: (i) raise awareness within the ADB community about emerging trends of conflict and conflict management practices within the organization, (ii) enhance the skill sets of OOMP staff to enable them to provide better services to the ADB community, and (iii) keep the office abreast of international best practices.
### Other Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Participants/Participants Involvement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>18 Outreach Sessions</strong> involving at least 894 participants</td>
<td>With 11 sessions in the ADB headquarters (835 participants) and 7 in field offices (59 participants), OOMP introduced its services to members of the ADB community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5 Group Meeting Facilitations</strong> involving approximately 70 participants</td>
<td>Targeted discussions to help address common concerns of specific groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>27 Internal Knowledge Sharing Activities</strong> (more than 600 participants)</td>
<td>Raised awareness on emerging trends and patterns of conflict, including those that needed immediate attention.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>27 External Knowledge Sharing Activities</strong> (approx. 330 participants)</td>
<td>Shared innovative approaches and knowledge to promote international best practices in the organizational ombuds profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>32 Meetings with External Ombuds</strong></td>
<td>Ombuds from other organizations increasingly seek our perspective on specific cases as well as in enhancing their respective programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>30 OOMP Staff Learning Activities</strong></td>
<td>Participated in internal and external educational events about various platforms for virtual work, and continued professional development in ombudsing and coaching especially in the context of virtual work environment.</td>
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**Outreach Program for an Orphanage**

As the Staff Welfare and Recreation Committee (SWR) of the Office of the President (OPR) Group for 2020, in collaboration with the other offices in OPR, the Office of the Ombudsperson utilized part of the group’s SWR budget to provide gifts to the children and staff of Meritxell Children’s World Foundation, Inc. at the end of the year.
Gift giving. The ombuds team, designated as the OPR Group’s Staff Welfare and Recreation Committee for 2020, handover gifts to staff of Merixxell Children’s World Foundation, Inc. Marikina City, 7 December 2020 (photo by Angelica Alejandro).

More gifts. Children and staff of Merixxell Children’s World Foundation, Inc. receive gifts from the Office of the President, Offices of the Vice Presidents, Office of the Ombudsperson, and Office of the Special Project Facilitator, or collectively called the OPR Group. Marikina City, 7 December 2020 (photo by Arlene Pantua).
What’s Next

The Office of the Ombudsperson continues to be an integral part of ADB’s organizational culture, with an earned reputation for fairness, integrity, and responsiveness, and for its principle of treating all individuals with dignity and respect. The office anticipates that, as a result, the Management, staff, and other members of the ADB community will continue to utilize its services.

To better provide for the evolving needs of the ADB community, OOMP will carry out the following activities beginning in 2021:

• Intensify efforts to redefine the distinction between the Office of the Ombudsperson and the Office of Professional Conduct and other formal resources at ADB.

• Conclude the comprehensive external review of the office and its relevant administrative order (AO 2.14), and implement appropriate and applicable recommendations from the said review.

• Complete the development of our database to improve the case management and tracking system, as well as redefining OOMP’s internal protocols.

• Support initiatives to educate other institutions about the benefits of having an organizational ombuds program.

• Develop and implement a strategic long-term communications plan for the Ombuds Office to enhance our outreach strategy.

• Design an interactive, user-friendly, and educational website.
Annex 1

Deconstructing the Recommendation for Developing a Comprehensive Mental Health and Well-being Support System

In previous years, the Office of the Ombudsperson has increasingly heard staff concerns about their struggles with mental well-being. One of the most damaging stigmas of mental health issues, including anxiety or depressive disorders, is that individuals suffering from them are taken non-seriously by co-workers or are incorrectly judged as inept. Consequently, the stigma and lack of empathy cause individuals to hide their challenges or hesitate to seek treatment.

The pandemic’s challenges may have worsened the status of mental well-being globally and the effects have been no different at the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Consequently, the COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the need to destigmatize mental health, create a supportive work environment for staff struggling with such concerns, and design a cohesive and comprehensive mental health and well-being support system at ADB. However, the lack of relevant data around the impacts or issues of mental health at ADB and on the adverse effects on mental well-being because of work-related stress, as well as the lack of a cohesive body of knowledge around best practices at other organizations are key considerations before creating such a system.

We suggest an independent and external evaluation of current health and well-being services at ADB in this respect, an assessment of personnel’s overall well-being, and an assessment of the impact of working practices on staff/personnel health and well-being to gain an objective and data-driven view. Key evidence-based recommendations for the development of a comprehensive mental health and support system can then follow.

Mental health matters

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “1 in 4 people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives.” At present, over a

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billion worldwide live with a mental disorder,\textsuperscript{2} accounting for 13\% of the total global burden of disease,\textsuperscript{3} placing mental health on the list of leading causes of illness and disability. The total number of people living with depression is 322 million, estimated to be 4.4\% of the global population.\textsuperscript{4} Furthermore, a report by the World Economic Forum in 2019 predicted that, by 2030, mental health problems would be the foremost cause of mortality and morbidity globally (footnote 3). In addition, the global economy loses over a trillion dollars each year due to depression and anxiety.\textsuperscript{5}

**Understanding mental health and well-being**

The WHO states that mental health is not only the absence of a condition, and that well-being is the state in which “an individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”\textsuperscript{6} Based on this definition, the promotion, endorsement and protection of mental well-being can be regarded as “a vital concern of individuals, communities, societies throughout the world” (footnote 6).

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Current context

The COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated detrimental worldwide trends in mental well-being. Emotional well-being and mental health are now considered the “hidden pandemic” or “the other COVID crisis.” The previous year was overshadowed by uncertainty as well as health concerns. In addition, restrictions, frequent lockdowns, and changes or demands to work practices may have created further work-related stresses or fueled anxieties in general.

No one has been immune to these effects. The Office of the Ombudsperson has observed similar trends in the previous year. Regardless of position, numerous members of the ADB community have struggled with fear, mental well-being challenges, work–life balance, loneliness, and isolation. Our office also received increasing cases of staff complaining of burnout and lack of motivation and a decline in general mental well-being since COVID-19 began. All complaints are indicative of the pandemic’s long-term mental health impacts. That said, the pandemic is not the only determinant of workplace stress—these trends were observed even before COVID-19.

Global effects

However, the pandemic’s consequent impact on mental and physical health cannot be entirely underestimated. A recent global survey of over 2,000 employers and an online Global Well-being Survey of 1,648 organizations across 41 countries, conducted by Aon in 2021, found that many of those surveyed identified mental health issues a cause of concern within their organizations. An overall 42% of employees surveyed had experienced a decline in their mental health since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (footnote 7).

It is still unclear how the pandemic will evolve but it seems evident that its impact on individual mental and psychosocial well-being will be significant. The risk is not only in the short term, but also for developing longer-term mental and physical health problems.

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**Staff health and well-being is crucial**

Mental health problems are predicted to become top economic burdens for employers and pose a risk from an operational point of view (footnote 8). In addition, there may also be some tacit costs for organizations that are related to lack of well-being in the workplace, such as: absenteeism and presenteeism.

Simply put, organizations need engaged and productive staff and employees require supportive, fulfilling work environments. If people don’t feel good, they are not likely to work at their best. Because people generally spend a third of their adult years working, workplaces can be integral to mental well-being and productivity. It is important to recognize that impacts can be negative if work practices or the workplace environment become unbalanced, unhealthy, or if there is a perceived lack of support, thereby contributing to ill health. That said, creating a supportive and healthy work environment is ethically responsible, but is also a responsibility shared by both management and staff.

**The way forward for ADB**

Even though the pandemic represents a physical health crisis, it potentially has the makings of a major mental health crisis. In addition, work-related stress is considered a psychosocial hazard (footnote 10): according to the WHO, prolonged exposure to stress/stressful job demands or psychosocial hazards may lead to far severe physical or psychological health problems.

COVID-19 may have introduced us to an unfamiliar new world, but it has also provided us an opportunity to take stock of our existing organizational culture, take ownership of some existing challenges at the workplace, and inculcate a culture that prioritizes well-being and destigmatizes mental health going forward.

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11. Absenteeism is any failure to report for or remain at work as scheduled, regardless of the reason. This is usually unplanned, for example, when someone falls ill, but can also be planned, for example during a strike or willful absence. It does not include vacation, personal leave, jury-duty leave, or other reasons.


In this past year, as per the Our People Strategy, ADB has taken significant steps to prioritize the protection, health, well-being, and safety of the entire ADB community. In order to create a cohesive and proactive strategy towards mental wellness, the commitment to ensure a duty of care requires ADB to have an evidence-based understanding of staff’s mental health challenges and work-practice related stresses as well as their associated impacts. In addition, we recommend an external evaluation of the current health and well-being services and Employee Assistance Program at ADB by experts. This would further an understanding of the gaps and potential for a more cohesive system of support for well-being as well as fostering a culture of inclusivity.

Some best practice employee well-being and mental health programs

The following list contains two examples of staff well-being programs that were launched after organizations carried out comprehensive surveys to ascertain key indicators of their staff’s mental health and psychosocial well-being. Results from the surveys emphasized that organizational effectiveness is achieved by optimizing staff well-being. They indicated that, despite access to in-house medical and physical health services and insurance schemes, more was required to “protect, improve and resolve mental health and well-being” of their staff. The final example provides insights into the mental health challenges of younger people and makes recommendations to promote their well-being. It emphasizes that any such strategy must begin with a reflection of the current organizational culture.

- **Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health in UNHCR**
- **United Nations System Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018–2023**
- **Accenture – It’s not 1 in 4, it’s all of us**

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Deconstructing the Recommendation to Review Work Practices and Culture

The context

COVID-19 has profoundly altered the way we work. As uncertainties continue and the pandemic continues to threaten health, we may be looking ahead at a lengthened period of working from home. Remote work has evolved from an interim solution to a possibly long-term fundamental shift. However, as we consider a return to work after the pandemic, this interlude is a great time to review our work practices and organizational culture.

The opportunity to work from home, while welcomed by some, has felt significantly stressful for others. Working through virtual platforms can be perceived as being “always on” which can create a constant and often false sense of urgency. Consequently, the psychological demands for those working from home in less-than-ideal physical workspaces around family distractions, juggling multiple responsibilities, and dealing with inflexible timelines at work could eventually lead to burnout.

What is burnout?

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes burnout as, “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” Some symptoms of burnout include feeling overwhelmed, exhaustion or lack of energy, increased mental distance from one’s job, and reduced productivity (footnote 2).

As more than half the global workforce has adapted to working remotely this year, supervisors and managers have also had to learn how to manage remote teams. In 2020,

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Annex 2

the Ombuds Office received many concerns from staff about perceived workload inequities, inflexible timelines for deliverables and the manner in which their supervisors or managers dealt with them during the year.

Current work practices/culture: room for change

Work–life balance has been one of the largest issues in 2020. Working beyond office hours has always been a practice for many, and the pandemic may have simply intensified this trend. Remote work has worsened and blurred the boundaries between work and personal life.

In addition, inflexible schedules for deliverables and (notwithstanding the current context and staff’s mental well-being) perceptions of workload inequity stand in the way of a fulfilling and stress-free work experience. Working longer hours, or longer workdays (to accommodate global teams) is not likely to lead to higher productivity but may lead to poorer quality of work and life, impacts on mental health as well as increasing “presenteeism”—defined as the loss of productivity when an employee is “present” but not mentally engaged (footnote 3). In addition, unable to switch off or facing consistently high levels of stress can have negative health outcomes.

In previous annual reports, the Office of the Ombudsperson has consistently highlighted how the work culture, with its focus on inflexible deliverables and operational competence, may inhibit innovation and creativity. It may also fail to take into account the human cost of goals.

What can ADB do?

Globally, organizations are still trying to ascertain what the future of work will look like beyond COVID-19. The pandemic has provided an opportunity to reflect on our own internal work practices and organizational culture at ADB and make changes that may have otherwise received greater resistance had there been no pandemic.

Especially during these times, it would be advantageous for ADB to endorse “courageous leadership:” show greater support to those who have demonstrated managerial

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courage to think outside the box and have acted upon it. It takes courage to stand out from the group, break away from the norm and to take on consequent risks. The erosion of boundaries during the pandemic and perceived workload inequities have reinforced the need for ADB leadership to hold supervisors accountable for not following directives.\(^5\)

Management, in all its forms, needs to embrace courageous leadership to effect profound and necessary change.

Allowances for flexible or personalized work styles may be one way to support staff well-being. Organizational culture can be changed, but it adjusts slowly. It requires commitment as a long-term strategic priority, managed through clearly defined objectives, timelines, and accountability. Management sets the tone for organizational culture and staff well-being.

In the medium term, supervisors and managers can support and empower personnel through setting their own boundaries for work and schedules that can be adapted as needed. As an example, and as suggested by BPMSD, teams could decide on “core hours,” where they commit to working together certain hours during the day and work flexibly and independently during others. Some organizations are considering the 4-day workweek.\(^6\) While some are considering global “right to disconnect” agreements\(^7\) to allow staff to “switch off” from work (footnote 1). Going forward, proactive steps will be required to make operational and cultural changes. Ultimately, organizational culture should be guided by actions that ensure staff well-being and take their susceptibility to COVID-fatigue and burnout into consideration.

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Office of the Ombudsperson 2020 Annual Report

The year 2020 ushered an unprecedented period as the world grapples with COVID-19. This year’s annual report by the Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP) indicates that the Asian Development Bank (ADB) community has not been spared from the effects and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. Of the 515 cases OOMP dealt with in 2020, almost half relate to safety, health, and physical environment issues. The shift to working from home has threatened the work–life balance, personal health, mental well-being, and personal security of ADB staff. This report presents case studies of some of these pandemic and work-related concerns, and provides recommendations on how to address these challenges.

About the Asian Development Bank

ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members —49 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.