



Press release (no embargo)

Whistleblowing: the number of reporting offices in public administrations has doubled

Bern, 11 January 2024 – Between 2018 and 2022, the number of whistleblowing reporting offices almost doubled. This positive and welcome trend is revealed in a study commissioned by the Swiss Federal Audit Office from the Graubünden University of Applied Sciences (FHGR). The survey covered the Confederation, all the cantons and the seven largest Swiss cities. Whistleblowing is regarded as a necessary and useful tool for improving public services.

Over half of the 34 entities surveyed have a whistleblowing reporting office. Nearly half of these offices were set up after 2018. Among the entities without a reporting office, the main reasons given for not having an office are: problems can already be reported directly; the political decision-makers do not currently wish to have such an office; or there is no obligation to set up such an office. The existence of a healthy culture of compliance and integrity was also cited as a reason. One third of entities which do not have a reporting office stated that they were looking into creating a reporting office.

Mainly anonymous reporting and public accountability

The reporting offices are the relevant financial auditor, the ombudsman or cantonal chancellery, or the human resources unit. The legal basis is provided by the Constitution, laws or ordinances. Eight entities have more than one reporting office, although most of them coordinate their activities. One third of the entities have an obligation to report illegal activity. Most reporting offices publish part or all of their activity report, thereby ensuring public accountability. Two thirds of the reporting offices offer the possibility of reporting anonymously.

There are various reasons for having a whistleblowing reporting office

The main reason for having a reporting office is the conviction that they are useful and effective. Many entities also want to use the reporting office to establish an open culture, improve the functioning of public services, or meet their obligations to their employees. Reporting offices mainly receive reports from employees of other public sector or subsidised entities, as well as from citizens. Reports may be made by email, phone, post or in a personal discussion. Every second reporting office has a web-based whistleblowing mechanism.

Lack of anonymity and instrumentalisation are the main risks

The main risks for a reporting office are that they will be misused for other ends, and that anonymity is not adequately ensured. Most of the reporting offices receive between one and twenty reports a year – and the trend is upwards. In 2022, 621 reports were submitted to the reporting offices, and 232 of those were sent to the SFAO. This is an increase of 150 reports compared to 2020. In three out of five cases, the reports were useful; 2% of reports turned out to be malicious and would have resulted in the reporting office being used for ulterior motives. Every tenth report involved criminal behaviour.

Enclosures:

- Whistleblowing reporting offices in public administrations – findings of a study by the FHGR (lead: Prof. Christian Hauser; collaborators: Jeanine Bretti Rainhalter, Ramona Stampfli). *The findings are available only in German.*

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A ground-breaking study

For the first time, a study has been conducted on whistleblowing reporting offices in Swiss public services. It was commissioned by the SFAO, and is aimed at sharing and expanding knowledge around this sensitive subject. The study findings are also useful for international organisations assessing the anti-corruption tools in Swiss public services. The study describes the characteristics, significance and development of whistleblowing mechanisms in public services. Reporting offices of public administrations are still relatively unknown. More proactive communication is needed. The SFAO operates the [whistleblowing reporting office for the centralised and decentralised Federal Administration](#).



The study findings were presented by Prof. Christian Hauser (FHGR) on 11 December 2023 to over 40 heads of whistleblowing reporting offices and financial auditors. The FHGR has already conducted similar surveys on the overall economy in four European countries.