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GOOD QUESTION

Do law firms employ 'fixers' in real life?

— Charles Storch

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Q: The legal drama "Michael Clayton" last week received seven Oscar nominations, including for best picture and best actor for George Clooney in the title role. The character Clayton has worked 17 years for a white-shoe New York law firm. He is a "special counsel" with a big corner office; he is not a partner, and he doesn't try cases or rack up billable hours. He is a "fixer" — to his own mind, a "janitor" — called upon only to clean up big clients' embarrassing messes and kick down doors that need opening. "Who is this guy?" asks the general counsel of a client corporation. Tempo wondered the same: Do big law firms have "fixers" on their staffs?

A: "It makes a nice movie, but I don't think there's much support for the notion of a fixer in the modern law firm world," said Thomas Morsch, a Northwestern University law professor and former partner at Chicago's Sidley Austin LLP. Morsch said large law firms have people who are well-connected and adept at trading favors, but their principal business is bringing in new clients and/or billing existing ones. He didn't rule out that there might be fixers at small firms that big firms call on when some mopping up is needed.

On his "Law Career Blog," Gregory Bowman, director of the International Law Center at Mississippi College law school, has written six entries to date about "Michael Clayton." Bowman said in an interview the film "is a great vehicle for addressing lots of law firm issues."

He wrote on his blog last fall: "I practiced in a big law firm for a number of years [including eight with Baker & McKenzie, in Chicago and Washington]. I never, ever heard of — let alone met — a law firm 'fixer.' I don't think they exist. And if they do, then like the Loch Ness monster they probably want to stay hidden."

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