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EXPLAINER

ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NEWS.

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Getting the Ax From George Clooney

Do firing consultants really exist?

By Jenny Rogers

Jason Reitman's *Up in the Air*, the likely Oscar-contender, which has pulled in more than \$44 million as of Jan. 3, features George Clooney as an HR gun-for-hire—an angel of death who swoops in from out of town to clean house and then departs in a hurry. Do such "firing consultants" really exist?

Sort of. Across America, there are firms that specialize in meeting the human resources needs of other companies large and small. They handle payroll, deal with benefits, and offer "termination assistance." Often that means offering legal advice or helping the boss develop a script for the firing process. The management consulting firm Right Management Inc., for example, trains a cadre of advisers on every aspect of firing. These consultants, in turn, teach clients to rehearse their speeches ahead of time, not to argue, and to talk for no longer than seven minutes. They also give tips on the best time of day and the best location to deliver the news. For clients who fear confrontation or a lawsuit, HR consultants can sit in on the firing. In such cases, however, they're usually just there as supportive observers. It's considered bad form for an outside consultant, rather than management, to actually lower the ax.

Firing people represents a small fraction of what most HR consultants actually do. Furthermore, most consultancies do not have agents who, like George Clooney in *Up in the Air*, assist clients with firing and nothing else.

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Firing for hire is still big business—Lee Hecht Harrison, for example, raked in \$300 million in 2008 for outplacement alone. General HR outsourcing began in the mid-1990s and has grown dramatically ever since. In 2009, U.S. companies spent \$3.6 billion on "outplacement services" (figuring out whom to fire and how to do it). This year's conservative projection is \$3.8 billion.

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