

Insights, News & Events

ALIENS, CONSPIRACIES, AND PING-PONG: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2026 OSCAR NOMINEES

Insights
Mar 10, 2026

Aliens, Conspiracies, and Ping-Pong: Lessons Learned From the 2026 Oscar Nominees

With Oscar season upon us, we're putting the spotlight on major employment law themes featured in this season's crop of Hollywood hits. From crisis management to clear communication on workplace policies to understanding evolving compensation laws for athletes, there are several lessons employers can take away from these nominees for top awards. The Oscars will air on March 15, but before you tune in, brush up on these important labor law reminders.

Bugonia: Corporate Culture and Compliance

Emma Stone is a Best Actress nominee for her performance in "[Bugonia](#)," a captivating thriller from Yorgos Lanthimos. She plays Michelle Fuller, the CEO of a pharmaceutical company kidnapped by beekeeper and warehouse employee Teddy Gatz (Jesse Plemons), who believes she is an alien destroying planet Earth. There are also several flashbacks revealing that Gatz's mother participated in the pharmaceutical company's medical trial that left her in a coma.

Crisis Management

Between the medical trials and the CEO's kidnapping, two main themes of the movie involve corporate compliance and crisis management. While the situations in Bugonia are

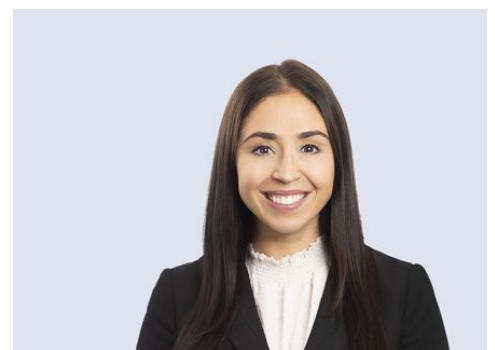
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unlikely to happen in real life, they highlight the importance of conducting risk assessments, crisis planning, and communication.

Corporate Culture

Fuller's workaholic mentality and management style serve as a reminder that corporate culture starts with the leadership team – and it's clear that her employees are highly stressed.

Several scenes throughout the film highlight the need for stronger leadership, clear workplace messages, and compliance practices, such as proper wage and hour compliance. For example, Fuller presses her assistant to remind staff about "The 5:30 Thing."

"We need to send the message that we have a new culture here now, where people should yes, of course, feel free to leave at 5:30 to be with their families," Fuller instructs her assistant. "But of course it's not compulsory. And obviously if people still have work to do, they should absolutely stay and continue to work. But it's not strictly enforced. Although we still do want to meet quotas."

She adds: "Just remembering we are running a business here, so let your 'conscience guide you' kind of thing."

You can watch a clip of this scene [here](#). Fuller uses these tactics throughout the movie for various reasons, including to muddy the waters around when the workday ends.

In addition to the negative impact on company culture, Fuller's work philosophy also raises potential compliance issues under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), as well as state and local laws, for unpaid wages or overtime. Employers of course must pay non-exempt employees for all hours worked, including overtime for hours exceeding 40 in a workweek. Even if many employees at the pharmaceutical company were exempt, Fuller's mixed messaging and pressure tactics are the type of conduct that create employee confusion and morale issues.

Workplace Safety

Bugonia also explores workplace safety reporting and corresponding investigations. Gatz encourages his coworker to report a potential OSHA violation for an incident involving



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the company's machinery. His coworker is fearful and says she doesn't "want any trouble."

In reality, employers should be cautious of potential whistleblower claims and develop procedures for conducting proper investigations. Remaining up to date on safety training and undergoing policy reviews can help minimize the chances of a claim being filed and improve your organization's legal defenses.

One Battle After Another: Employee Tracking

"One Battle After Another" is an action-packed thriller starring Leonardo DiCaprio as an off-the-grid activist whose objective is to protect his daughter. The characters exercise caution to avoid detection, including the use of mobile devices to evade tracking. Accordingly, any confidential communication requires a series of complex questions to protect their information.

Employers are increasingly using geolocation tools to monitor employees working in the field or remotely. The theme in this movie reminds employers to protect workers' privacy rights. ([Read about best practices when using geolocation tools here.](#)) Remember to obtain informed, voluntary consent, ensuring employees are fully aware of the geolocation monitoring system and how it will be used. Voluntary consent requires clearly communicating the purpose, scope, and duration of the monitoring, and ensuring that tracking is limited to legitimate business purposes.

Further, employers should be aware of state-specific and international legal requirements, as privacy laws and employee rights can vary significantly by jurisdiction. Staying informed about evolving legal requirements and maintaining best practices in privacy and data protection are essential for compliance.

Marty Supreme and F1: Sports Compensation

Two sports dramas are in the running for Best Picture before the Academy this year. "[Marty Supreme](#)" starring Timothée Chalamet follows a table tennis player as he strives to become a world champion. "[F1](#)" explores the world of Formula One racing through the story of a seasoned race car driver who returns to the track to support a struggling team. Both films examine how athletes support themselves

financially while pursuing their dreams. The films also depict athletes navigating sponsorships, endorsements, and prize money.

Athletes in the US, whether individual (like table tennis) or team-based (like Formula One) are subject to complex work relationships and are currently facing a changing legal landscape, especially when it comes to student athletes. Adding to the complexity is athletes' rights to their name, image, and likeness (NIL). The rise of digital media has enabled athletes to monetize their personal brands through direct sponsorships, content creation, and social media endorsements.

Moreover, federal and state regulations governing athlete compensation are evolving. For example, [a 2025 executive order sought to ban third-party "pay-for-play" payments to collegiate athletes while permitting NIL deals](#). And Athletes.org, a players association seeking to organize college athletes, [issued its first-ever draft Collective Bargaining Agreement framework in 2025](#), though it's not finalized. As the landscape consistently shifts, businesses and education institutions should continue to monitor these developments.

On Our Radar: Send Help

Already generating 2027 Oscars buzz is the survival thriller "[Send Help](#)," starring Rachel McAdams and Dylan O'Brien. The film focuses on the survival of an overworked employee (McAdams) and her newly appointed boss (O'Brien) when a plane on the way to a corporate meeting crashes over a seemingly deserted island.

Before both are fighting for survival, McAdams' character endures public mocking in the office and is passed over for a promised promotion that is given to her new boss's college pal instead. The themes of workplace bullying and potential discrimination act as a reminder to ensure you regularly assess workplace risks and update your company's policies and procedures. Title VII and certain state and local laws prohibit employers from discriminating against an individual based on, among other things, the person's gender. The anti-discrimination prohibitions extend to differential treatment, offensive comments, or other forms of harassment and retaliation.

To mitigate the risk of costly litigation, employers should consider implementing training focused on ensuring managers understand and can identify both overt and more subtle discriminatory behavior. O'Brien's character could have surely benefitted from such training before being faced with a life-or-death situation with a resentful employee.

Conclusion

If you need assistance in crafting appropriately tailored workplace policies or training for employees or managers, reach out to your Fisher Phillips attorney or the authors of this Insight. We will continue to monitor developments related to all aspects of workplace law. Make sure you are subscribed to [Fisher Phillips' Insight System](#) to get the most up-to-date information. If you have questions, contact your Fisher Phillips attorney or the authors of this Insight.