

**IN THE IOWA ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS DIVISION
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS BUREAU**

PHAVANNA TERRELL
Claimant

CONAGRA FOODS PACKAGED FOODS LL
Employer

APPEAL 23A-UI-09422-LJ-T
**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

OC: 09/17/23
Claimant: Appellant (2)

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a—Discharge from Employment

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

On October 5, 2023, claimant Phavanna Terrell filed an appeal from the October 4, 2023 (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision that denied benefits based on a determination that Conagra Foods Packaged Foods LLC discharged her on September 15, 2023 for violation of a known company rule. The parties were properly notified of the hearing. A telephonic hearing was held at 8:00 a.m. on Friday, October 20, 2023. Claimant Phavanna Terrell personally participated and witness Justin Terrell testified on claimant's behalf. Employer Conagra Foods Packaged Foods LLC participated through witnesses Simmie Buehler, HR Manager; Ryan Snyder and Lisa Ensign observed the hearing. Amelia Gallagher of Equifax represented the employer. Employer's Exhibit 1 was not admitted into the record because it was not mailed to claimant within a reasonable amount of time to reach claimant prior to the hearing and claimant had not, in fact, received it.

ISSUE:

Was the claimant discharged from employment for any disqualifying, job-related misconduct?

FINDINGS OF FACT:

Having reviewed all of the evidence in the record, the administrative law judge finds: Claimant began working for this employer on April 11, 2005. Most recently, she worked full-time hours as a team leader production. Claimant's employment ended on September 15, 2023, when the employer discharged her for violating its Safety for Life policy.

On September 1, claimant was performing a task called "center-lining," during which she used a marker to mark on a particular machine. The employer claims that while performing this machine, claimant failed to properly perform the "lock-out/tag-out" safety procedure in violation of the employer's Safety for Life policy. Claimant admits she did not "lock out" the machine, because she was marking a rail "outside the machine." Claimant denies entering the machine or acting in any way that violated the Safety for Life policy.

The employer suspended claimant on September 12 pending a full investigation, then it investigated the incident by reviewing video surveillance of claimant's actions on September 1

and conducting interviews to understand the safety procedures for the machine. The employer never showed claimant the surveillance video or any still images from the video to show her the violation she committed. Based on its investigation, the employer determined claimant violated the Safety for Life policy and discharged her on September 15, 2023.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons that follow, the administrative law judge concludes the employer did not discharge claimant for disqualifying, job-related misconduct. Benefits are allowed, provided she is otherwise eligible.

Iowa Code section 96.5(2)(a) and (d) provide:

An individual shall be *disqualified for benefits*:

2. *Discharge for misconduct.* If the department finds that the individual has been discharged for misconduct in connection with the individual's employment:

a. The disqualification shall continue until the individual has worked in and has been paid wages for insured work equal to ten times the individual's weekly benefit amount, provided the individual is otherwise eligible.

...

d. For the purposes of this subsection, "*misconduct*" means a deliberate act or omission by an employee that constitutes a material breach of the duties and obligations arising out of the employee's contract of employment. Misconduct is limited to conduct evincing such willful or wanton disregard of an employer's interest as is found in deliberate violation or disregard of standards of behavior which the employer has the right to expect of employees, or in carelessness or negligence of such degree of recurrence as to manifest equal culpability, wrongful intent or even design, or to show an intentional and substantial disregard of the employer's interests or of the employee's duties and obligations to the employer. Misconduct by an individual includes but is not limited to all of the following:

- (1) Material falsification of the individual's employment application.
- (2) Knowing violation of a reasonable and uniformly enforced rule of an employer.
- (3) Intentional damage of an employer's property.
- (4) Consumption of alcohol, illegal or nonprescribed prescription drugs, or an impairing substance in a manner not directed by the manufacturer, or a combination of such substances, on the employer's premises in violation of the employer's employment policies.
- (5) Reporting to work under the influence of alcohol, illegal or nonprescribed prescription drugs, or an impairing substance in an off-label manner, or a combination of such substances, on the employer's premises in violation of the

employer's employment policies, unless the individual is compelled to work by the employer outside of scheduled or on-call working hours.

(6) Conduct that substantially and unjustifiably endangers the personal safety of coworkers or the general public.

(7) Incarceration for an act for which one could reasonably expect to be incarcerated that results in missing work.

(8) Incarceration as a result of a misdemeanor or felony conviction by a court of competent jurisdiction.

(9) Excessive unexcused tardiness or absenteeism.

(10) Falsification of any work-related report, task, or job that could expose the employer or coworkers to legal liability or sanction for violation of health or safety laws.

(11) Failure to maintain any license, registration, or certification that is reasonably required by the employer or by law, or that is a functional requirement to perform the individual's regular job duties, unless the failure is not within the control of the individual.

(12) Conduct that is libelous or slanderous toward an employer or an employee of the employer if such conduct is not protected under state or federal law.

(13) Theft of an employer or coworker's funds or property.

(14) Intentional misrepresentation of time worked or work carried out that results in the individual receiving unearned wages or unearned benefits.

The employer has the burden of proof in establishing disqualifying job misconduct. *Cosper v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982).

A determination as to whether an employee's act is misconduct does not rest solely on the interpretation or application of the employer's policy or rule. A violation is not necessarily disqualifying misconduct even if the employer was fully within its rights to impose discipline up to or including discharge for the incident under its policy. The issue is not whether the employer made a correct decision in separating claimant, but whether the claimant is entitled to unemployment insurance benefits. *Infante v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 364 N.W.2d 262 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). What constitutes misconduct justifying termination of an employee and what misconduct warrants denial of unemployment insurance benefits are two separate decisions. *Pierce v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 425 N.W.2d 679 (Iowa Ct. App. 1988). Misconduct serious enough to warrant discharge is not necessarily serious enough to warrant a denial of job insurance benefits. Such misconduct must be "substantial." *Newman v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 351 N.W.2d 806 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). The focus is on deliberate, intentional, or culpable acts by the employee.

When based on carelessness, the carelessness must actually indicate a "wrongful intent" to be disqualifying in nature. *Id.* Negligence does not constitute misconduct unless recurrent in nature; a single act is not disqualifying unless indicative of a deliberate disregard of the employer's interests. *Henry v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 391 N.W.2d 731 (Iowa Ct. App. 1986).

Poor work performance is not misconduct in the absence of evidence of intent. *Miller v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 423 N.W.2d 211 (Iowa Ct. App. 1988).

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(4) provides:

(4) Report required. The claimant's statement and the employer's statement must give detailed facts as to the specific reason for the claimant's discharge. Allegations of misconduct or dishonesty without additional evidence shall not be sufficient to result in disqualification. If the employer is unwilling to furnish available evidence to corroborate the allegation, misconduct cannot be established. In cases where a suspension or disciplinary layoff exists, the claimant is considered as discharged, and the issue of misconduct shall be resolved.

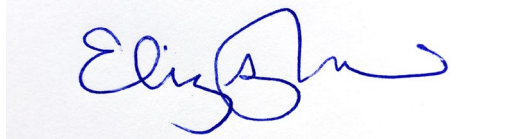
It is the duty of the administrative law judge as the trier of fact in this case, to determine the credibility of witnesses, weigh the evidence and decide the facts in issue. *Arndt v. City of LeClaire*, 728 N.W.2d 389, 394-395 (Iowa 2007). The Iowa Supreme Court has ruled that if a party has the power to produce more explicit and direct evidence than it chooses to present, the administrative law judge may infer that evidence not presented would reveal deficiencies in the party's case. *Crosser v. Iowa Dep't of Pub. Safety*, 240 N.W.2d 682 (Iowa 1976). The administrative law judge may believe all, part or none of any witness's testimony. *State v. Holtz*, 548 N.W.2d 162, 163 (Iowa App. 1996). In assessing the credibility of witnesses, the administrative law judge should consider the evidence using his or her own observations, common sense and experience. *Id.* In determining the facts, and deciding what testimony to believe, the fact finder may consider the following factors: whether the testimony is reasonable and consistent with other believable evidence; whether a witness has made inconsistent statements; the witness's appearance, conduct, age, intelligence, memory and knowledge of the facts; and the witness's interest in the trial, their motive, candor, bias and prejudice. *Id.*

The findings of fact show how I have resolved the disputed factual issues in this case. I assessed the credibility of the witnesses who testified during the hearing, considering the applicable factors listed above, and using my own common sense and experience. I find claimant Phavanna Terrell credibly testified that the "center-lining" task, as she performed it on September 1, did not require a full "lock-out/tag-out" of the machine. The employer claims to have video surveillance showing claimant violating its Safety for Life policy and numerous employee interviews stating "lock-out/tag-out" was required for this "center-lining" task. However, the employer did not produce any of the source material as evidence. In light of *Crosser*, I believe this evidence would not have shown all employees understood this task to require the full "lock-out/tag-out" procedure and I believe the video would have undercut the employer's description of it as a clear display of claimant breaking the plane of the machine with her body.

The employer has not established that claimant committed a final act of disqualifying, job-related misconduct. Claimant's performance of the "center-lining" task, based on the credible evidence in the record, does not amount to a violation of the employer's safety rules or company policy, and claimant appears not to have been acting against the employer's interests in performing this task; she was performing her job safely and to the best of her ability. Therefore, I find claimant was discharged for no disqualifying reason. Benefits are allowed.

DECISION:

The October 4, 2023 (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision is reversed. Claimant was discharged from employment for no disqualifying reason. Benefits are allowed, provided she is otherwise eligible. Any benefits claimed and withheld on this basis shall be paid.



Elizabeth A. Johnson
Administrative Law Judge

October 27, 2023
Decision Dated and Mailed

Lj/scn

APPEAL RIGHTS. If you disagree with the decision, you or any interested party may:

1. Appeal to the Employment Appeal Board within fifteen (15) days of the date under the judge's signature by submitting a written appeal via mail, fax, or online to:

**Iowa Employment Appeal Board
6200 Park Avenue Suite 100
Des Moines, Iowa 50321
Fax: (515)281-7191
Online: eab.iowa.gov**

The appeal period will be extended to the next business day if the last day to appeal falls on a weekend or a legal holiday.

AN APPEAL TO THE BOARD SHALL STATE CLEARLY:

- 1) The name, address, and social security number of the claimant.
- 2) A reference to the decision from which the appeal is taken.
- 3) That an appeal from such decision is being made and such appeal is signed.
- 4) The grounds upon which such appeal is based.

An Employment Appeal Board decision is final agency action. If a party disagrees with the Employment Appeal Board decision, they may then file a petition for judicial review in district court.

2. If no one files an appeal of the judge's decision with the Employment Appeal Board within fifteen (15) days, the decision becomes final agency action, and you have the option to file a petition for judicial review in District Court within thirty (30) days after the decision becomes final. Additional information on how to file a petition can be found at Iowa Code §17A.19, which is online at <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/code/17A.19.pdf> or by contacting the District Court Clerk of Court <https://www.iowacourts.gov/iowa-courts/court-directory/>.

Note to Parties: YOU MAY REPRESENT yourself in the appeal or obtain a lawyer or other interested party to do so provided there is no expense to Workforce Development. If you wish to be represented by a lawyer, you may obtain the services of either a private attorney or one whose services are paid for with public funds.

Note to Claimant: It is important that you file your weekly claim as directed, while this appeal is pending, to protect your continuing right to benefits.

SERVICE INFORMATION:

A true and correct copy of this decision was mailed to each of the parties listed.

DERECHOS DE APELACIÓN. Si no está de acuerdo con la decisión, usted o cualquier parte interesada puede:

1. Apelar a la Junta de Apelaciones de Empleo dentro de los quince (15) días de la fecha bajo la firma del juez presentando una apelación por escrito por correo, fax o en línea a:

**Iowa Employment Appeal Board
6200 Park Avenue Suite 100
Des Moines, Iowa 50321
Fax: (515)281-7191
En línea: eab.iowa.gov**

El período de apelación se extenderá hasta el siguiente día hábil si el último día para apelar cae en fin de semana o día feriado legal.

UNA APELACIÓN A LA JUNTA DEBE ESTABLECER CLARAMENTE:

- 1) El nombre, dirección y número de seguro social del reclamante.
- 2) Una referencia a la decisión de la que se toma la apelación.
- 3) Que se interponga recurso de apelación contra tal decisión y se firme dicho recurso.
- 4) Los fundamentos en que se funda dicho recurso.

Una decisión de la Junta de Apelaciones de Empleo es una acción final de la agencia. Si una de las partes no está de acuerdo con la decisión de la Junta de Apelación de Empleo, puede presentar una petición de revisión judicial en el tribunal de distrito.

2. Si nadie presenta una apelación de la decisión del juez ante la Junta de Apelaciones Laborales dentro de los quince (15) días, la decisión se convierte en acción final de la agencia y usted tiene la opción de presentar una petición de revisión judicial en el Tribunal de Distrito dentro de los treinta (30) días después de que la decisión adquiriera firmeza. Puede encontrar información adicional sobre cómo presentar una petición en el Código de Iowa §17A.19, que se encuentra en línea en <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/code/17A.19.pdf> o comunicándose con el Tribunal de Distrito Secretario del tribunal <https://www.iowacourts.gov/iowa-courts/court-directory/>.

Nota para las partes: USTED PUEDE REPRESENTARSE en la apelación u obtener un abogado u otra parte interesada para que lo haga, siempre que no haya gastos para Workforce Development. Si desea ser representado por un abogado, puede obtener los servicios de un abogado privado o uno cuyos servicios se paguen con fondos públicos.

Nota para el reclamante: es importante que presente su reclamo semanal según las instrucciones, mientras esta apelación está pendiente, para proteger su derecho continuo a los beneficios.

SERVICIO DE INFORMACIÓN:

Se envió por correo una copia fiel y correcta de esta decisión a cada una de las partes enumeradas.