

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS BUREAU**

STEVEN D BINNS
Claimant

PELLA CORPORATION
Employer

APPEAL 18A-UI-09340-LJ-T

**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

**OC: 08/05/18
Claimant: Respondent (2)**

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a – Discharge for Misconduct
Iowa Code § 96.3(7) – Recovery of Benefit Overpayment
Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.10 – Employer/Representative Participation Fact-finding Interview

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

The employer filed an appeal from the August 30, 2018 (reference 02) unemployment insurance decision that allowed benefits based upon a determination that claimant was discharged and the employer failed to establish willful or deliberate misconduct. The parties were properly notified of the hearing. A telephonic hearing was held on September 26, 2018. The claimant, Steven Binns, participated. The employer, Pella Corporation, participated through Miraldo Michel, Human Resources Representative. Employer's Exhibits 1 through 4 were received and admitted into the record without objection. The administrative law judge took official notice of the administrative record.

ISSUES:

Was the claimant discharged for disqualifying job-related misconduct?
Has the claimant been overpaid unemployment insurance benefits, and if so, can the repayment of those benefits to the agency be waived?
Can charges to the employer's account be waived?

FINDINGS OF FACT:

Having reviewed all of the evidence in the record, the administrative law judge finds: Claimant was employed full-time, most recently as a production coordinator, from May 3, 1999, until July 26, 2018, when he was suspended and ultimately discharged for violating the employer's Respectful Work Environment and Electronic Communication Policies. The employer maintains an Information Security and Electronic Communications Policy. This policy prohibits employees from (among other things) viewing or commenting on content that is offensive on the basis of sex. On July 17, someone reported to the employer that claimant had been on the computer for an excessive period of time. The employer investigated this by running a computer usage report to fully understand claimant's computer usage between July 2 and July 13. The results of this computer usage report showed claimant had visited a Stormy Daniels website and had spent considerable amounts of time on doublelist.com. Claimant described doublelist.com as similar to craigslist.com. While on doublelist.com, claimant visited pages including: "looking for

hot sexy fun;" "ongoing FWB relationship;" "need company tonight;" and "want some touch and fun." On July 24, 2018, the employer brought in claimant and suspended him for his inappropriate computer usage. Claimant was subsequently discharged and mailed a letter dated July 30, 2018. (Exhibit 1)

The administrative record reflects that claimant has received unemployment benefits in the amount of \$2,802.00, since filing a claim with an effective date of August 5, 2018, for the six weeks ending September 15, 2018. The administrative record also establishes that the employer did participate in the fact-finding interview or make a first-hand witness available for rebuttal. Michel participated in the fact-finding interview.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons that follow, the administrative law judge concludes claimant was discharged from employment due to disqualifying, job-related conduct. Benefits are withheld.

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a provides:

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 individual shall be disqualified for benefits 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.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(1)a provides:

Discharge for misconduct.

(1) Definition.

a. "Misconduct" is defined as a deliberate act or omission by a worker which constitutes a material breach of the duties and obligations arising out of such worker's contract of employment. Misconduct as the term is used in the disqualification provision as being 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 evil 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. On the other hand mere inefficiency, unsatisfactory conduct, failure in good performance as the result of inability or incapacity, inadvertencies or ordinary negligence in isolated instances, or good faith errors in judgment or discretion are not to be deemed misconduct within the meaning of the statute.

This definition has been accepted by the Iowa Supreme Court as accurately reflecting the intent of the legislature. *Huntoon v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 275 N.W.2d 445, 448 (Iowa 1979). Misconduct must be "substantial" to warrant a denial of job insurance benefits. *Newman v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 351 N.W.2d 806 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). 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).

The employer is entitled to establish reasonable work rules and expect employees to abide by them. In this case, claimant was discharged from employment for repeatedly viewing inappropriate content on a work computer. The names of the pages that claimant was visiting indicate claimant was viewing content that was offensive on the basis of sex. Regardless of the employer’s policy, the content that claimant was viewing is generally accepted to be inappropriate for the workplace. Claimant’s conduct was in deliberate disregard of the employer’s interests and amounts to disqualifying misconduct even without prior warning. Benefits are withheld.

The next issues to be determined are whether claimant has been overpaid benefits, whether the claimant must repay those benefits, and whether the employer’s account will be charged. Iowa Code § 96.3(7)a-b, as amended in 2008, provides:

7. Recovery of overpayment of benefits.

a. If an individual receives benefits for which the individual is subsequently determined to be ineligible, even though the individual acts in good faith and is not otherwise at fault, the benefits shall be recovered. The department in its discretion may recover the overpayment of benefits either by having a sum equal to the overpayment deducted from any future benefits payable to the individual or by having the individual pay to the department a sum equal to the overpayment.

b. (1) (a) If the department determines that an overpayment has been made, the charge for the overpayment against the employer’s account shall be removed and the account shall be credited with an amount equal to the overpayment from the unemployment compensation trust fund and this credit shall include both contributory and reimbursable employers, notwithstanding section 96.8, subsection 5. The employer shall not be relieved of charges if benefits are paid because the employer or an agent of the employer failed to respond timely or adequately to the department’s request for information relating to the payment of benefits. This prohibition against relief of charges shall apply to both contributory and reimbursable employers.

(b) However, provided the benefits were not received as the result of fraud or willful misrepresentation by the individual, benefits shall not be recovered from an individual if the employer did not participate in the initial determination to award benefits pursuant to section 96.6, subsection 2, and an overpayment occurred because of a subsequent reversal on appeal regarding the issue of the individual’s separation from employment.

(2) An accounting firm, agent, unemployment insurance accounting firm, or other entity that represents an employer in unemployment claim matters and demonstrates a continuous pattern of failing to participate in the initial determinations to award benefits, as determined and defined by rule by the department, shall be denied permission by the department to represent any employers in unemployment insurance matters. This subparagraph does not

apply to attorneys or counselors admitted to practice in the courts of this state pursuant to section 602.10101.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.10 provides:

Employer and employer representative participation in fact-finding interviews.

(1) "Participate," as the term is used for employers in the context of the initial determination to award benefits pursuant to Iowa Code section 96.6, subsection 2, means submitting detailed factual information of the quantity and quality that if unrebutted would be sufficient to result in a decision favorable to the employer. The most effective means to participate is to provide live testimony at the interview from a witness with firsthand knowledge of the events leading to the separation. If no live testimony is provided, the employer must provide the name and telephone number of an employee with firsthand information who may be contacted, if necessary, for rebuttal. A party may also participate by providing detailed written statements or documents that provide detailed factual information of the events leading to separation. At a minimum, the information provided by the employer or the employer's representative must identify the dates and particular circumstances of the incident or incidents, including, in the case of discharge, the act or omissions of the claimant or, in the event of a voluntary separation, the stated reason for the quit. The specific rule or policy must be submitted if the claimant was discharged for violating such rule or policy. In the case of discharge for attendance violations, the information must include the circumstances of all incidents the employer or the employer's representative contends meet the definition of unexcused absences as set forth in [871—subrule 24.32\(7\)](#). On the other hand, written or oral statements or general conclusions without supporting detailed factual information and information submitted after the fact-finding decision has been issued are not considered participation within the meaning of the statute.

(2) "A continuous pattern of nonparticipation in the initial determination to award benefits," pursuant to Iowa Code section 96.6, subsection 2, as the term is used for an entity representing employers, means on 25 or more occasions in a calendar quarter beginning with the first calendar quarter of 2009, the entity files appeals after failing to participate. Appeals filed but withdrawn before the day of the contested case hearing will not be considered in determining if a continuous pattern of nonparticipation exists. The division administrator shall notify the employer's representative in writing after each such appeal.

(3) If the division administrator finds that an entity representing employers as defined in Iowa Code section 96.6, subsection 2, has engaged in a continuous pattern of nonparticipation, the division administrator shall suspend said representative for a period of up to six months on the first occasion, up to one year on the second occasion and up to ten years on the third or subsequent occasion. Suspension by the division administrator constitutes final agency action and may be appealed pursuant to Iowa Code section 17A.19.

(4) "Fraud or willful misrepresentation by the individual," as the term is used for claimants in the context of the initial determination to award benefits pursuant to Iowa Code section 96.6, subsection 2, means providing knowingly false statements or knowingly false denials of material facts for the purpose of

obtaining unemployment insurance benefits. Statements or denials may be either oral or written by the claimant. Inadvertent misstatements or mistakes made in good faith are not considered fraud or willful misrepresentation.

This rule is intended to implement Iowa Code section 96.3(7)“b” as amended by 2008 Iowa Acts, Senate File 2160.

Because the claimant's separation was disqualifying, benefits were paid to which he was not entitled. The unemployment insurance law provides that benefits must be recovered from a claimant who receives benefits and is later determined to be ineligible for benefits, even though the claimant acted in good faith and was not otherwise at fault. However, the overpayment will not be recovered when it is based on a reversal on appeal of an initial determination to award benefits on an issue regarding the claimant's employment separation if: (1) the benefits were not received due to any fraud or willful misrepresentation by the claimant and (2) the employer did not participate in the initial proceeding to award benefits. The employer will not be charged for benefits if it is determined that they did participate in the fact-finding interview. Iowa Code § 96.3(7), Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.10. In this case, the claimant has received benefits but was not eligible for those benefits. Since the employer did participate in the fact-finding interview, the claimant is obligated to repay to the agency the benefits he received and the employer's account shall not be charged.

DECISION:

The August 30, 2018 (reference 02) unemployment insurance decision is reversed. Claimant was discharged from employment due to job-related misconduct. Benefits are withheld until such time as he has worked in and been paid wages for insured work equal to ten times his weekly benefit amount, provided he is otherwise eligible. The claimant has been overpaid unemployment insurance benefits in the amount of \$2,802.00 and is obligated to repay the agency those benefits. The employer did participate in the fact-finding interview and its account shall not be charged.

Elizabeth A. Johnson
Administrative Law Judge

Decision Dated and Mailed

lj/scn