

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

Legal Standards: Iowa Code Section 96.5(2)(a) (2015) provides:

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

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

The Division of Job Service defines misconduct at 871 IAC 24.32(1)(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 the 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 is the meaning which has been given the term in other jurisdictions under similar statutes, and we believe it accurately reflects the intent of the legislature." *Huntoon v. Iowa Department of Job Service*, 275 N.W.2d, 445, 448 (Iowa 1979).

The employer has the burden to prove the claimant was discharged for work-connected misconduct as defined by the unemployment insurance law. *Cosper v. Iowa Department of Job Service*, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982). The propriety of a discharge is not at issue in an unemployment insurance case. An employer may be justified in discharging an employee, but the employee's conduct may not amount to misconduct precluding the payment of unemployment compensation. The law limits disqualifying misconduct to substantial and willful wrongdoing or repeated carelessness or negligence that equals willful misconduct in culpability. *Lee v. Employment Appeal Board*, 616 NW2d 661 (Iowa 2000).

In the specific context of absenteeism the administrative code provides:

Excessive unexcused absenteeism. Excessive unexcused absenteeism is an intentional disregard of the duty owed by the claimant to the employer and shall be considered misconduct except for illness or other reasonable grounds for which the employee was absent and that were properly reported to the employer.

871 IAC 24.32(7); *See Higgins v. IDJS*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 190 n. 1 (Iowa 1984) ("rule [2]4.32(7)...accurately states the law").

The requirements for a finding of misconduct based on absences are therefore twofold. First, the absences must be excessive. *Sallis v. Employment Appeal Bd*, 437 N.W.2d 895, 897 (Iowa 1989). The determination of whether unexcused absenteeism is excessive necessarily requires consideration of past acts and warnings. *Higgins v. IDJS*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 192 (Iowa 1984). Second the absences must be unexcused. *Cosper v. IDJS*, 321 N.W.2d 6, 10(Iowa 1982). The requirement of “unexcused” can be satisfied in two ways. An absence can be unexcused either because it was not for “reasonable grounds”, *Higgins v. IDJS*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 191 (Iowa 1984), or because it was not “properly reported”. *Cosper v. IDJS*, 321 N.W.2d 6, 10(Iowa 1982)(excused absences are those “with appropriate notice”). Absences related to issues of personal responsibility such as transportation, lack of childcare, and oversleeping are not considered excused for reasonable grounds. *Higgins v. IDJS*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 191 (Iowa 1984).

Unexcused: The first step in our analysis is to identify which of the absences were unexcused. We must also determine whether the final tardiness which caused the absence was unexcused. Again an absence can be unexcused because not for reasonable grounds or because not properly reported. Here the two days absence was neither. First, the only reason apparent in the record for the absences is that the Claimant was still angry over his argument. This is not reasonable grounds to miss work. Second, it is clear that the after-the-fact texting and Facebook messaging is not a proper means of reporting absences.

Excessiveness: Having identified the unexcused absences, including the final one, we now ask whether the absences were excessive. In cases of absenteeism it is the law, and not the Employer’s policies, that decides whether absences are excused or not. *Gaborit v. Employment Appeal Board*, 743 N.W.2d 554, 557-58 (Iowa App. 2007). It is the same with excessiveness of absences. It is the Board, not the employer, who decides if *misconduct* is shown.

Two absences is the minimum there can be to have a repeated absence. Here the absences were exacerbated by being no call, no show and by being two in a row. In the case of *Armel v. EAB*, 2007 WL 3376929*3 (Iowa App. Nov. 15, 2007) the Court was faced with a claimant who had eight absences over an eight-month period. That claimant missed her last day to care for a sick child, but did not call in. She argued that of her eight absences most were excused under the law. The Court of Appeal found it unnecessary to address this argument, since three of the absences were unexcused. The three absences were in October, March, and May. The Court ruled “we find the three absences constitute excessive unexcused absenteeism.” *Armel* slip op. at 5. While the Claimant in this case has two absences, and *Armel* had three, there are aggravating circumstances in this case compared to *Armel*.

First of all, the Claimant was absent two days in a row. So he missed more unexcused days in a week than Ms. *Armel* missed over any two months. Second, *Armel* was no call/no show on only her last absence while the Petitioner was no call/no show on both his. Third, Ms. *Armel* had an undeniable reason for missing work, a sick child. The only reasons shown in this record for the Claimant’s absences is the Claimant’s pique over his decision to self-demote. Fourth, this Employer had a clear policy that two no call/nw show is termination and the Claimant signed for this policy. Fifth, the Claimant had been a member of the management team and should have known the result of two days no call/no show. We find the Claimant was guilty of excessive unexcused absences and is thus disqualified for misconduct.

Single Absence Analysis: In the alternative we take up the question of when absences may be misconduct even when not excessive. In instances where an employee is fired for a *single* unexcused absence the issue is somewhat different than with excessive absenteeism. See *Hiland v. EAB*, No. 12-2300 (Iowa App. 7/10/13). With a single absence misconduct can be shown based on things such as the nature of an employee's work, the effect of the employee's absence, dishonesty or falsification by the employee in regard

to the unexcused absence, and whether the employee made any attempt to notify the employer of the absence. *Sallis v. Employment Appeal Bd*, 437 N.W.2d 895, 897 (Iowa 1989). Here we have little on the nature of the work, but we do know that the Claimant had just self-demoted because he was upset with management. His attempts to report were weak, especially for a former manager, and after the fact. He also should have known, as a former member of the management team who signed for the Employer's policies, that two days no call/no show was automatic termination. Also, of course, this was two days of absence and not just one. So we have two no call/no show absences in a row over no other reason shown in the record but being mad at management. We think that this is misconduct, even if not excessive unexcused absenteeism.

Note to Claimant: The procedural aspects of this case are a little odd. The Claimant did not attend the hearing. We do not know if the Claimant had a legally sufficient excuse for not attending since he has filed no argument with the Board. We recognize, of course, that until today the Claimant had prevailed and thus has no reason to try to explain his absence at hearing. We point this out now so that the Claimant is explicitly aware of the ability to apply for rehearing of today's decision within 20 days of issuance of today's decision. The Claimant may make whatever argument for reopening that he thinks appropriate, and this would include argument explaining why the Claimant failed to attend the hearing. We are not saying the argument would necessarily prevail, only that we would consider it. We do caution that the 20-day deadline for applying for rehearing is not flexible.

No Repayment Of Overpayment: Finally, since the Administrative Law Judge allowed benefits and in so doing affirmed a decision of the claims representative, the Claimant falls under the double affirmance rule:

871 IAC 23.43(3) Rule of two affirmances.

- a. Whenever an administrative law judge affirms a decision of the representative or the employment appeal board of the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals affirms the decision of an administrative law judge, allowing payment of benefits, such benefits shall be paid regardless of any further appeal.
- b. However, if the decision is subsequently reversed by higher authority:
 - (1) The protesting employer involved shall have all charges removed for all payments made on such claim.
 - (2) All payments to the claimant will cease as of the date of the reversed decision unless the claimant is otherwise eligible.
 - (3) No overpayment shall accrue to the claimant because of payment made prior to the reversal of the decision.

Thus the Employer's account may not be charged for any benefits paid so far to the Claimant for the weeks in question, but the Claimant will not be required to repay benefits already received.

DECISION:

The administrative law judge's decision dated April 3, 2015 is **REVERSED**. The Employment Appeal Board concludes that the claimant was discharged for disqualifying misconduct. Accordingly, he is denied benefits until such time the Claimant has worked in and has been paid wages for insured work equal to ten times the Claimant's weekly benefit amount, provided the Claimant is otherwise eligible. See, Iowa Code section 96.5(2)'a'.

No remand for determination of overpayment need be made under the double affirmance rule, 871 IAC 23.43(3), but still the Employer's account may not be charged.

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