

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS**

68-0157 (9-06) - 3091078 - EI

DAVID N LUTZ

Claimant

APPEAL NO. 11A-UI-16195-JTT

**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

CARGILL MEAT SOLUTIONS CORP

Employer

OC: 11/20/11

Claimant: Respondent (2-R)

Section 96.5(2)(a) – Discharge for Misconduct

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

The employer filed a timely appeal from the December 12, 2011, reference 01, decision that allowed benefits. After due notice was issued, a hearing was held on January 20, 2012. Claimant David Lutz participated. Ben Wise represented the employer. Exhibits One through Eight were received into evidence.

ISSUE:

Whether the claimant was discharged for misconduct in connection with the employment that disqualifies the claimant for unemployment insurance benefits.

FINDINGS OF FACT:

Having reviewed all of the evidence in the record, the administrative law judge finds: David Lutz was employed by Cargill Meat Solutions as a full-time production worker from 2009 until August 29, 2011 when Sarah James, assistant human resources manager, discharged him for attendance. Mr. Lutz's work hours were 5:30 a.m. to 2:15 p.m., Monday through Friday.

The final absence that triggered the discharge occurred on August 26, 2011, when Mr. Lutz left work early for personal reasons. Mr. Lutz had additional employment as a bartender and needed to leave early from Cargill to go cover for someone at his other job. Mr. Lutz spoke to his supervisor before he left.

The employer has a written attendance policy set out in a handbook that was provided to Mr. Lutz at start of his employment. Under the policy, Mr. Lutz was required to contact a designated phone line at least 30 minutes prior to scheduled start of his shift if he needed to be absent from work. Mr. Lutz was aware of the policy.

In making the decision to end Mr. Lutz's employment, the employer considered absences dating back to October 9, 2010. In each instance, Mr. Lutz provided proper notice to the employer pursuant to the attendance policy. On October 9 and on November 1, 2010, Mr. Lutz was absent for personal reasons. On February 9 and 10, 2011, Mr. Lutz was absent due to illness. On February 28, April 15, April 29, and August 12, Mr. Lutz was late for personal reasons. On

February 21, April 14, June 17, June 27, August 3 and August 23, Mr. Lutz was absent for personal reasons. On May 12 and August 22, Mr. Lutz left work early for personal reasons. On July 20, 21, and 22, Mr. Lutz was absent due to illness.

During the employment, the employer provided several written warnings to Mr. Lutz regarding his accrual of attendance points and the fact that this could lead to discipline including discharge from the employment.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

Iowa Code section 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.

871 IAC 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.

The employer has the burden of proof in this matter. See Iowa Code section 96.6(2). Misconduct must be substantial in order to justify a denial of unemployment benefits. Misconduct serious enough to warrant the discharge of an employee is not necessarily serious enough to warrant a denial of unemployment benefits. See Lee v. Employment Appeal Board, 616 N.W.2d 661 (Iowa 2000). The focus is on deliberate, intentional, or culpable acts by the employee. See Gimbel v. Employment Appeal Board, 489 N.W.2d 36, 39 (Iowa Ct. App. 1992).

While past acts and warnings can be used to determine the magnitude of the current act of misconduct, a discharge for misconduct cannot be based on such past act(s). The termination of employment must be based on a current act. See 871 IAC 24.32(8). In determining whether the conduct that prompted the discharge constituted a "current act," the administrative law judge

considers the date on which the conduct came to the attention of the employer and the date on which the employer notified the claimant that the conduct subjected the claimant to possible discharge. See also Greene v. EAB, 426 N.W.2d 659, 662 (Iowa App. 1988).

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. See 871 IAC 24.32(4). When it is in a party's power to produce more direct and satisfactory evidence than is actually produced, it may fairly be inferred that the more direct evidence will expose deficiencies in that party's case. See Crosser v. Iowa Dept. of Public Safety, 240 N.W.2d 682 (Iowa 1976).

In order for a claimant's absences to constitute misconduct that would disqualify the claimant from receiving unemployment insurance benefits, the evidence must establish that the claimant's *unexcused* absences were excessive. See 871 IAC 24.32(7). The determination of whether absenteeism is excessive necessarily requires consideration of past acts and warnings. However, the evidence must first establish that the most recent absence that prompted the decision to discharge the employee was unexcused. See 871 IAC 24.32(8). Absences related to issues of personal responsibility such as transportation and oversleeping are considered unexcused. On the other hand, absences related to illness are considered excused, provided the employee has complied with the employer's policy regarding notifying the employer of the absence. Tardiness is a form of absence. See Higgins v. Iowa Department of Job Service, 350 N.W.2d 187 (Iowa 1984). Employers may not graft on additional requirements to what is an excused absence under the law. See Gaborit v. Employment Appeal Board, 743 N.W.2d 554 (Iowa Ct. App. 2007). For example, an employee's failure to provide a doctor's note in connection with an absence that was due to illness properly reported to the employer will not alter the fact that such an illness would be an excused absence under the law. Gaborit, 743 N.W.2d at 557.

The weight of the evidence establishes that Mr. Lutz was absent for personal reasons, as opposed to illness, on October 9 and November 1, 2010, February 21 and 28, April 14, 15 and 29, May 12, June 17 and 27, and August 3, 12, 22, 23 and 26. Each of these absences was an unexcused absence under the applicable law. Mr. Lutz's absences occurred in the context of repeated warnings regarding his accrual of attendance points. Mr. Lutz's unexcused absences were excessive and constituted misconduct in connection with the employment. Mr. Lutz is disqualified for benefits until 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 employer's account shall not be charged for benefits paid to Mr. Lutz.

Iowa Code section 96.3(7) 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. The overpayment recovery law was updated in 2008. See Iowa Code section 96.3(7)(b). Under the revised law, a claimant will not be required to repay an overpayment of benefits if all of the following factors are met. First, the prior award of benefits must have been made in connection with a decision regarding the claimant's separation from a particular employment. Second, the claimant must not have engaged in fraud or willful misrepresentation to obtain the benefits or in connection with the Agency's initial decision to award benefits. Third, the employer must not have participated at the initial fact-finding proceeding that resulted in the initial decision to award benefits. If Workforce Development determines there has been an overpayment of benefits, the employer will not be charged for the benefits, regardless of whether the claimant is required to repay the benefits.

Because the claimant has been deemed ineligible for benefits, any benefits the claimant has received would constitute an overpayment. Accordingly, the administrative law judge will remand the matter to the Claims Division for determination of whether there has been an overpayment, the amount of the overpayment, and whether the claimant will have to repay the benefits.

DECISION:

The Agency representative's December 12, 2011, reference 01, decision is reversed. The claimant was discharged for misconduct. The claimant is disqualified for unemployment benefits until he has worked in and been paid wages for insured work equal to ten times his weekly benefit allowance, provided he meets all other eligibility requirements. The employer's account shall not be charged.

This matter is remanded to the Claims Division for determination of whether there has been an overpayment, the amount of the overpayment, and whether the claimant will have to repay the benefits.

James E. Timberland
Administrative Law Judge

Decision Dated and Mailed

jet/kjw