

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS**

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

CHRISTINA M PONCE
Claimant

APPEAL NO. 17A-UI-02624-JTT

**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

KRAFT HEINZ FOODS COMPANY
Employer

OC: 02/12/17
Claimant: Appellant (2)

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

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

Christina Ponce filed a timely appeal from the February 27, 2017, reference 01, decision that disqualified her for benefits and that relieved the employer of liability for benefits, based on an Agency conclusion that the claimant had been discharged for misconduct in connection with the employment. After due notice was issued, a hearing was held on March 31, 2017. Ms. Ponce participated. The employer did not comply with the hearing notice instructions to register a telephone number for the hearing and did not participate.

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: Christina Ponce was employed by Kraft Heinz Foods Company from 2015 until February 8, 2017, when the employer discharged her for attendance. The most recent absences that factored in to the discharge occurred on January 11 and 12, 2017. On each day, Ms. Ponce was absent due to illness and properly reported the absences to the employer. Ms. Ponce returned to work on January 16, 2017 and continued to perform work for the employer until February 8, 2017. On that day, the employer notified Ms. Ponce that she had exceeded the allowable number of attendance points and was discharged from the employment. The employer had not addressed the January 11 and 12 absences with Ms. Ponce prior to February 8, 2017 and had given no warning before that date that the absences placed Ms. Ponce's employment in jeopardy.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

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).

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 employer did not participate in the hearing and did not present any evidence to support the allegation that Ms. Ponce was discharged for misconduct in connection with the employment. The evidence in the record fails to establish a current act of misconduct. The evidence establishes that the final absences that factored in the discharge were due to illness, were properly reported to the employer and, therefore, were excused absences under the applicable law. The evidence establishes that employer waited almost a month to address with Ms. Ponce the absences that had come to the employer's attention on the day they occurred.

Based on the evidence in the record and application of the appropriate law, the administrative law judge concludes that Ms. Ponce was discharged for no disqualifying reason. Accordingly, Ms. Ponce is eligible for benefits, provided she is otherwise eligible. The employer's account may be charged for benefits.

DECISION:

The February 27, 2017, reference 01, decision is reversed. The claimant was discharged on February 8, 2017 for no disqualifying reason. The claimant is eligible for benefits, provided he is otherwise eligible. The employer's account may be charged.

James E. Timberland
Administrative Law Judge

Decision Dated and Mailed

jet/rvs