

**IOWA DEPARTMENT OF INSPECTIONS AND APPEALS
ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS DIVISION, UI APPEALS BUREAU**

STACY J SUTTON

Claimant

APPEAL 22A-UI-14875-AR-T

**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

ATLANTIC BOTTLING CO

Employer

OC: 06/12/22

Claimant: Respondent (1R)

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:

On July 11, 2022, the employer filed an appeal from the July 1, 2022, (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision that allowed benefits based on the determination that claimant was discharged without a showing of misconduct. The parties were properly notified about the hearing. A telephone hearing was held on August 18, 2022. Claimant, Stacy J. Sutton, did not participate. Employer, Atlantic Bottling Co., participated through Shirley Jones. Employer's Exhibits 1 and 2 were admitted. 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 began working for employer on December 6, 2021. Claimant last worked as a full-time merchandiser. Claimant was separated from employment on June 7, 2022, when she was discharged.

Claimant last worked at the employer on April 4, 2022. Around that time, she sustained an injury. It was investigated and determined to be an injury that was not work related. Claimant and Jones discussed her options. Claimant had not worked long enough to qualify for FMLA, but she applied for and began receiving short-term disability. The employer worked with claimant through the next two months. However, in early June 2022, Jones followed up with claimant. At that time, claimant could not provide a projected date on which she could return to work. The employer determined that business needs required that claimant should be

discharged since she had no projected date on which she could return. The employer discharged her on June 7, 2022.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons that follow, the administrative law judge concludes that claimant was discharged from employment for no disqualifying reason.

Prior to July 1, 2022, Iowa Code section 96.5(2) provided in relevant part:

An individual shall be disqualified for benefits, regardless of the source of the individual's wage credits:

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.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871—24.32 provides in relevant part:

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).

Effective July 1, 2022, Iowa Code section 96.5(2) provides in relevant part:

An individual shall be disqualified for benefits, regardless of the source of the individual's wage credits:

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 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. 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.

Recently, Governor Reynolds signed into law House File 2355, which among other things amended Iowa Code section 96.5(2) to further define misconduct and to enumerate specific acts that constitute misconduct. The bill did not include an effective date and so took effect on July 1, 2022. See Iowa Const. art. III, § 26; Iowa Code § 3.7(1).

There is a strong presumption in American jurisprudence against legislation being applied retroactively. "The principle that the legal effect of conduct should ordinarily be assessed under the law that existed when the conduct took place has timeless and universal human appeal." *Kaiser Aluminum & Chem. Corp. v. Bonjorno*, 494 U.S. 827, 855 (1990) (SCALIA, J. concurring). This is in part because "elementary considerations of fairness dictate that individuals should have an opportunity to know what the law is and to conform their conduct accordingly...." *Landgraf v. USI Film Prod.*, 511 U.S. 244, 265 (1994).

The administrative law judge finds it would be fundamentally unfair and inconsistent with widely accepted legal principles to apply the amended Iowa Code section 96.5(2) to the conduct at issue here, which occurred prior to the law becoming effective on July 1, 2022. As such, the administrative law judge finds the amended Iowa Code section 96.5(2) effective July 1, 2022, should not be applied to the conduct at issue here and instead Iowa Code section 96.5(2) as it existed at the time of the conduct will be applied.

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 claimant's discharge from employment must be based on a current, substantial act of job-related misconduct in order to disqualify the claimant from unemployment insurance benefits. The employer bears the burden of proof in such cases. *Myers v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 462 N.W.2d 734, 737 (Iowa Ct. App. 1990). In order to constitute misconduct, the conduct at issue must consist of deliberate acts or omissions or such carelessness as to indicate a wrongful intent. *Kelly v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 386 N.W.2d 552, 554 (Iowa Ct. App. 1986). And while prior acts of misconduct may be considered in determining the magnitude of the current act, the discharge must be based on a current and specific act of misconduct to be disqualifying. *Id.*; Iowa Admin. Code r. 871—24.32(8).

The issue in such cases is not whether the employer had the right to terminate the claimant's employment but whether the claimant is entitled to unemployment insurance benefits. *Infante v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 364 N.W.2d 262, 264 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). What constitutes misconduct justifying termination of an employee and what constitutes misconduct disqualifying a claimant from unemployment insurance benefits are two separate questions. *Pierce v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 425 N.W.2d 679, 680 (Iowa Ct. App. 1988). Misconduct serious enough to warrant discharge is not necessarily serious enough to warrant a denial of unemployment

insurance benefits. *Newman v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 351 N.W.2d 806, 808 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). Misconduct must be "substantial" in order to support a disqualification from unemployment insurance benefits. *Id.*

In an at-will employment environment an employer may discharge an employee for any number of reasons or no reason at all, provided the discharge is not contrary to public policy. However, if the employer fails to meet its burden of proof to establish job related misconduct as the reason for the separation, it incurs potential liability for unemployment insurance benefits related to that separation.

There is no testimony that indicates that claimant was discharged due to misconduct on her part. Instead, she was unable to return to work for reasons the employer was aware of. Claimant was discharged as the result of a business-related decision, not due to her own actions that constituted an intentional disregard of the employer's interests. The separation is not disqualifying.

Because the separation is not disqualifying, the issues of overpayment, repayment, and participation are moot.

DECISION:

The July 1, 2022, (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision is AFFIRMED. Claimant was discharged from employment for no disqualifying reason. Benefits are allowed, provided She is otherwise eligible.

REMAND:

For the reasons outlined in the findings of fact above, the issue of claimant's ability to and availability for work is remanded to the Benefits Bureau of Iowa Workforce Development for initial investigation and determination.



Alexis D. Rowe
Administrative Law Judge

September 29, 2022
Decision Dated and Mailed

ar/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:

**Employment Appeal Board
4th Floor – Lucas Building
Des Moines, Iowa 50319
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:

**Employment Appeal Board
4th Floor – Lucas Building
Des Moines, Iowa 50319
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.