

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS BUREAU**

JODY D OPPENHEIMER
Claimant

CNH AMERICA LLC
Employer

APPEAL 19A-UI-03617-LJ-T
**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

OC: 04/07/19
Claimant: Appellant (2)

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a – Discharge for Misconduct
Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7) – Excessive Unexcused Absenteeism

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

The claimant filed an appeal from the April 26, 2019, (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision that denied benefits based upon a determination that claimant was discharged from employment for violation of a known company rule. The parties were properly notified of the hearing. A telephonic hearing was held on May 21, 2019. The claimant, Jody D. Oppenheimer, participated. The employer, CNH America, L.L.C., participated through Valerie Hammond, HR Representative. Employer's Exhibits 1 through 9 were received and admitted into the record.

ISSUE:

Was the claimant discharged for disqualifying job-related misconduct?

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 CNC machine operator, from February 11, 2008, until April 5, 2019, when he was discharged for leaving work early without proper notification or permission.

The final incident leading to claimant's discharge occurred on April 2, 2019. Claimant was scheduled to work one hour of overtime at the end of his shift, requiring him to work until 5:30 p.m. The employer had posted this overtime schedule in three areas of the workplace the day prior. Claimant did not look at the schedule, because for the past year he had consistently worked 11-hour days and departed at 4:30 p.m. While claimant was at the time clock punching out for the day, two coworkers pointed out that he was scheduled to work overtime. (Exhibits 7 and 8) Claimant decided to leave work anyway.

Claimant had no active warnings related to attendance, and he had no recent attendance issues. Claimant received a verbal warning because of attendance on February 28, 2018. The four absences leading to this written warning were all due to illness. While claimant was on a

Last Chance Agreement at the time of his discharge, this was because of work performance and not because of attendance.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons that follow, the administrative law judge concludes claimant was discharged from employment for no disqualifying reason. Benefits are allowed, provided claimant is otherwise eligible.

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(7) provides:

(7) 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.

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 Dep't of Job Serv.*, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982). The issue is not whether the employer made a correct decision in separating claimant, but whether the claimant is entitled to unemployment insurance benefits. *Infante v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 364 N.W.2d 262 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). What constitutes misconduct justifying termination of an employee and what misconduct warrants denial of unemployment insurance benefits are two separate decisions. *Pierce v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 425 N.W.2d 679 (Iowa Ct. App. 1988).

Excessive absences are not considered misconduct unless unexcused. Absences due to properly reported illness cannot constitute work-connected misconduct since they are not volitional, even if the employer was fully within its rights to assess points or impose discipline up to or including discharge for the absence under its attendance policy. Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7); *Cosper*, 321 N.W.2d at 6; *Gaborit v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 734 N.W.2d 554 (Iowa Ct. App. 2007). Medical documentation is not essential to a determination that an absence due to illness should be treated as excused. *Gaborit*, 734 N.W.2d at 554. 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. Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7) (emphasis added); see *Higgins v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 190, n. 1 (Iowa 1984) holding "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. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 437 N.W.2d 895 (Iowa 1989). The determination of whether unexcused absenteeism is excessive necessarily requires

consideration of past acts and warnings. *Higgins* at 192. Second, the absences must be unexcused. *Cosper* at 10. The requirement of “unexcused” can be satisfied in two ways. An absence can be unexcused either because it was not for “reasonable grounds,” *Higgins* at 191, or because it was not “properly reported,” holding excused absences are those “with appropriate notice.” *Cosper* at 10.

The term “absenteeism” also encompasses conduct that is more accurately referred to as “tardiness.” An absence is an extended tardiness, and an incident of tardiness is a limited absence. Absences related to issues of personal responsibility such as transportation, lack of childcare, and oversleeping are not considered excused. *Higgins, supra*.

Absences must be both excessive and unexcused to result in a finding of misconduct. A failure to report to work without notification to the employer is generally considered an unexcused absence. However, one unexcused absence is not disqualifying since it does not meet the excessiveness standard.

An employee is entitled to fair warning that the employer will no longer tolerate certain performance and conduct. Without fair warning, an employee has no reasonable way of knowing that there are changes that need be made in order to preserve the employment. If an employer expects an employee to conform to certain expectations or face discharge, appropriate (preferably written), detailed, and reasonable notice should be given.

In this case, the employer has not established that claimant was discharged for disqualifying absenteeism. The final incident leading to claimant’s discharge involved claimant leaving work early without permission. Even if the final incident occurred exactly as the employer testified, this is only one incident of absenteeism. Further, claimant had no recent warnings for absenteeism, and he was not reasonably aware that his job would be in jeopardy if he left early that day. The employer has not met its burden of proving claimant was discharged for excessive, unexcused absenteeism. Benefits are allowed, provided the claimant is otherwise eligible.

DECISION:

The April 26, 2019, (reference 01) unemployment insurance decision is reversed. Claimant was discharged from employment for no disqualifying reason. Benefits are allowed, provided he is otherwise eligible. Any benefits claimed and withheld on this basis shall be paid.

Elizabeth A. Johnson
Administrative Law Judge

Decision Dated and Mailed

lj/rvs