

**IN THE IOWA ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS DIVISION  
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS BUREAU**

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**TIFFANY BISIGNANO**  
Claimant

**BUNION SURGERY SPECIALISTS LLC**  
Employer

**APPEAL 24A-UI-09281-SN-T**  
**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE  
DECISION**

**OC: 09/29/24**  
**Claimant: Respondent (2)**

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a – Discharge for Misconduct  
Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(1)a – Discharge for Misconduct  
Iowa Code § 96.3(7) – Recovery of Benefit Overpayment  
Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.10 – Recovery of Benefit Overpayment

**STATEMENT OF THE CASE:**

The employer, Bunion Surgery Specialists LLC, filed an appeal from the October 25, 2024, (reference 02) unemployment insurance decision granting benefits based upon the determination the claimant was discharged, but misconduct was not shown. The parties were properly notified of the hearing.

A telephone hearing was held on November 18, 2024, at 9:00 a.m. The claimant participated and testified. The employer participated through Chief Operating Officer and Clinic Director Mindi Dayton and Clinic Care Coordinator Brittnei Bassi. The employer was represented by Timothy Lloyd, an unemployment insurance representative. This administrative law judge took official notice of the administrative hearing records. Exhibit 1 was received into the record.

**ISSUES:**

Was the claimant's separation disqualifying?

Whether the claimant has been overpaid benefits? Whether the claimant is excused from repayment of benefits due to the employer's non-participation?

**FINDINGS OF FACT:**

Having reviewed all of the evidence in the record, the administrative law judge finds:

The claimant worked as a full-time medical assistant from December 27, 2022, until she was separated from employment on October 2, 2024, when she was terminated.

The employer has regular meetings. In these meetings, management impresses on staff the employer's core values of integrity and excellence. The employer has a rule about gossiping in the workplace.

As a medical facility, it must keep confidential patient records to comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act ("HIPAA").

On December 22, 2023, the claimant received a verbal written warning about the way she spoke to other medical assistants.

In May 2024, the claimant received a performance improvement plan. The performance improvement plan referred to the way the claimant spoke with other medical assistants.

On September 27, 2024, the claimant corrected one of the medical assistants erred in scheduling the patient because she read the chart wrong, while this medical assistant was still on the phone. The claimant remarked this is how errors keep happening. The medical assistant said it was an oversight and she would correct it. The claimant walked over to Clinic Care Coordinator Brittni Bassi. The claimant also pointed at the front desk to reference another medical assistant that had been snubbing her attempt to make small talk. Ms. Bassi told the claimant to ignore these perceived signs of disrespect.

The claimant then took a picture of the medical assistant's laptop, and she clicked the application on the tray to display chat messages between the two medical assistants. The claimant was the subject of the conversation. Both medical assistants shared negative views about the claimant. The claimant pulled out her phone and took a picture of the messages to provide proof to leadership of these negative behaviors. The claimant reasoned that as the lead medical assistant, this needed to stop, but if she just reported it to management, the absence of proof would lead to lack of discipline.

After taking this picture, the claimant approached Ms. Bassi again. The claimant was visibly angry and demanded to have a meeting with Chief Operating Officer Mindi Dayton, Ms. Bassi and one of the medical assistants. During the meeting, the claimant shared that she had seen on this medical assistant's computer that they had been posting negative messages to each other about her. The claimant said she knew this because she saw the message by looking over the medical assistant's shoulder.

Ms. Bassi attempted to calm the claimant down. The claimant then shared a picture of her daughter on her phone, but Ms. Bassi saw the picture of the chat messages. The claimant then asked Ms. Bassi if she could keep a secret because she was unsure if she would get in trouble. The two women had an informal practice of confiding to each other about work-related matters that began with this prompt. Ms. Bassi told the claimant it depended on the secret. The claimant then told Ms. Bassi she took the picture and sent it to her boyfriend and added that he was angry. The claimant explained that she knew they were doing this because one was closing her laptop every time the claimant looked in that direction.

On October 1, 2024, Ms. Bassi asked to speak with Ms. Dayton about what the claimant had shared with her. That same afternoon, Ms. Dayton gave the two medical assistants final written warnings for gossiping about the claimant.

On October 2, 2024, Ms. Dayton terminated the claimant for taking the picture of the medical assistant's laptop and failing to disclose this.

The claimant has received \$404.00 in unemployment insurance benefits separating from this employment.

On October 17, 2024, Iowa Workforce Development sent a notice of fact-finding to the parties informing them of a fact-finding interview on October 23, 2024. The employer did not receive the notice of factfinding in time to be informed of the hearing because it does not regularly check its own mail. By the time Ms. Dayton became aware of the factfinding, she was too late to participate.

### **REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:**

The administrative law judge concludes the claimant was discharged from employment due to job-related misconduct. Benefits are denied.

The claimant has been overpaid \$404.00 in unemployment insurance benefits. The employer did not participate in the fact-finding interview due to its own fault. The employer may have to repay the overpayment.

The decision in this case rests, at least in part, on the credibility of the witnesses. It is the duty of the administrative law judge as the trier of fact in this case, to determine the credibility of witnesses, weigh the evidence and decide the facts in issue. *Arndt v. City of LeClaire*, 728 N.W.2d 389, 394-395 (Iowa 2007). The administrative law judge may believe all, part or none of any witness's testimony. *State v. Holtz*, 548 N.W.2d 162, 163 (Iowa App. 1996). In assessing the credibility of witnesses, the administrative law judge should consider the evidence using his or her own observations, common sense and experience. *Id.* In determining the facts, and deciding what testimony to believe, the fact finder may consider the following factors: whether the testimony is reasonable and consistent with other believable evidence; whether a witness has made inconsistent statements; the witness's appearance, conduct, age, intelligence, memory and knowledge of the facts; and the witness's interest in the trial, their motive, candor, bias and prejudice. *Id.*

After assessing the credibility of the witnesses who testified during the hearing, reviewing the exhibits submitted by the parties, considering the applicable factors listed above, and using his own common sense and experience, the administrative law judge finds the employer's version of events to be more credible than the claimant's recollection of those events.

The claimant has an interest in this case that colors her description of events. It is acknowledged that she is the lead and may have been frustrated with these subordinates. Nevertheless, the record shows the claimant felt the need to conceal this behavior and said as much to Ms. Bassi. This shows the claimant knew that her dishonesty in the meeting about the means she obtained these pictures was significant. Specifically, the claimant said that she saw this just over the shoulder of one of the medical assistants, rather than admitting she took a picture of the messages with her cell phone.

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.

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.

Iowa Code section 96.5(2)b, c and d provide:

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:

b. Provided further, if gross misconduct is established, the department shall cancel the individual's wage credits earned, prior to the date of discharge, from all employers.

c. Gross misconduct is deemed to have occurred after a claimant loses employment as a result of an act constituting an indictable offense in connection with the claimant's employment, provided the claimant is duly convicted thereof or has signed a statement admitting the commission of such an act. Determinations regarding a benefit claim may be redetermined within five years from the effective date of the claim. Any benefits paid to a claimant prior to a determination that the claimant has lost employment as a result of such act shall not be considered to have been accepted by the claimant in good faith.

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 result 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 licenses, 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.

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). 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). The Iowa Court of Appeals found substantial evidence of misconduct in testimony that the claimant worked slower than he was capable of working and would temporarily and briefly improve following oral reprimands. *Sellers v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 531 N.W.2d 645 (Iowa Ct. App. 1995). Generally, continued refusal to follow reasonable instructions constitutes misconduct. *Gilliam v. Atlantic Bottling Co.*, 453 N.W.2d 230 (Iowa Ct. App. 1990). Misconduct must be "substantial" to warrant a denial of job insurance benefits. *Newman v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 351 N.W.2d 806 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). Poor work performance is not misconduct in the absence of evidence of intent. *Miller v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 423 N.W.2d 211 (Iowa Ct. App. 1988).

As stated above in the credibility section, I find the claimant's dishonesty in the meeting to be significant enough to be disqualifying. The claimant maintains that she had to take a picture of the subordinate's laptop to perform her duties as a lead. I disagree. The claimant acknowledged to Ms. Bassi that she believed she could be in trouble due to taking the picture of the subordinate's laptop.

It is acknowledged that the employer did not have a specific rule regarding taking pictures of a subordinate's laptop. However, the claimant had been disciplined previously about stirring up issues with these other employees at work. The claimant's statement to Ms. Bassi that she may have been in trouble for doing this was recognition that taking the picture could be seen as needlessly adding drama. This is especially given that Ms. Bassi had told her earlier that day to disregard the perceived slights of these coworkers. That is not to say that it was misconduct to report these issues to management. Rather it was misconduct to conceal the way she obtained this information given the realization that it could be seen as an extension of previous altercations with these subordinates. In other words, management had an interest in knowing everything that the claimant knew, so that it could make the best decision going forward in maintaining the delicate balance of morale between these coworkers. Benefits are denied.

The next issue is whether the claimant has been overpaid for benefits. Iowa Code § 96.3(7)a-b, as amended in 2008, provides:

7. Recovery of overpayment of benefits.

a. If an individual receives benefits for which the individual is subsequently determined to be ineligible, even though the individual acts in good faith and is not otherwise at fault, the benefits shall be recovered. The department in its discretion may recover the overpayment of benefits either by having a sum equal to the overpayment deducted from any future benefits payable to the individual or by having the individual pay to the department a sum equal to the overpayment.

b. (1) (a) If the department determines that an overpayment has been made, the charge for the overpayment against the employer's account shall be removed and the account shall be credited with an amount equal to the overpayment from the unemployment compensation trust fund and this credit shall include both contributory and reimbursable employers, notwithstanding section 96.8, subsection 5. The employer shall not be relieved of charges if benefits are paid because the employer or an agent of the employer failed to respond timely or adequately to the department's request for information relating to the payment of benefits. This prohibition against relief of charges shall apply to both contributory and reimbursable employers.

(b) However, provided the benefits were not received as the result of fraud or willful misrepresentation by the individual, benefits shall not be recovered from an individual if the employer did not participate in the initial determination to award benefits pursuant to section 96.6, subsection 2, and an overpayment occurred because of a subsequent reversal on appeal regarding the issue of the individual's separation from employment.

(2) An accounting firm, agent, unemployment insurance accounting firm, or other entity that represents an employer in unemployment claim matters and demonstrates a continuous pattern of failing to participate in the initial determinations to award benefits, as determined and defined by rule by the department, shall be denied permission by the department to represent any employers in unemployment insurance matters. This subparagraph does not apply to attorneys or counselors admitted to practice in the courts of this state pursuant to section 602.10101.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.10 provides:

Employer and employer representative participation in fact-finding interviews.

(1) "Participate," as the term is used for employers in the context of the initial determination to award benefits pursuant to Iowa Code section 96.6, subsection 2, means submitting detailed factual information of the quantity and quality that if unrebutted would be sufficient to result in a decision favorable to the employer. The most effective means to participate is to provide live testimony at the interview from a witness with firsthand knowledge of the events leading to the separation. If no live testimony is provided, the employer must provide the name and telephone number of an employee with firsthand information who may be contacted, if necessary, for rebuttal. A party may also participate by providing detailed written statements or documents that provide detailed factual information of the events leading to separation. At a minimum, the information provided by the employer or the employer's representative must identify the dates and particular circumstances of the incident or incidents, including, in the case of discharge, the act or omissions of the claimant or, in the event of a voluntary separation, the stated reason for the quit. The specific rule or policy must be submitted if the claimant was discharged for violating such rule or policy. In the case of discharge for attendance violations, the information must include the circumstances of all incidents the employer or the employer's representative contends meet the definition of unexcused absences as set forth in [871—subrule 24.32\(7\)](#). On the other hand, written or oral statements or general conclusions without supporting detailed factual information and information submitted after the fact-finding decision has been issued are not considered participation within the meaning of the statute.

(2) "A continuous pattern of nonparticipation in the initial determination to award benefits," pursuant to Iowa Code section 96.6, subsection 2, as the term is used for an entity representing employers, means on 25 or more occasions in a calendar quarter beginning with the first calendar quarter of 2009, the entity files appeals after failing to participate. Appeals filed but withdrawn before the day of the contested case hearing will not be considered in determining if a continuous

pattern of nonparticipation exists. The division administrator shall notify the employer's representative in writing after each such appeal.

(3) If the division administrator finds that an entity representing employers as defined in Iowa Code section 96.6, subsection 2, has engaged in a continuous pattern of nonparticipation, the division administrator shall suspend said representative for a period of up to six months on the first occasion, up to one year on the second occasion and up to ten years on the third or subsequent occasion. Suspension by the division administrator constitutes final agency action and may be appealed pursuant to Iowa Code section 17A.19.

(4) "Fraud or willful misrepresentation by the individual," as the term is used for claimants in the context of the initial determination to award benefits pursuant to Iowa Code section 96.6, subsection 2, means providing knowingly false statements or knowingly false denials of material facts for the purpose of obtaining unemployment insurance benefits. Statements or denials may be either oral or written by the claimant. Inadvertent misstatements or mistakes made in good faith are not considered fraud or willful misrepresentation.

This rule is intended to implement Iowa Code section 96.3(7)"b" as amended by 2008 Iowa Acts, Senate File 2160.

The claimant has received \$404.00 in unemployment insurance benefits separating from this employment.

Because the claimant's separation was disqualifying, benefits were paid to which she was not entitled. The unemployment insurance law 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. However, the overpayment will not be recovered when it is based on a reversal on appeal of an initial determination to award benefits on an issue regarding the claimant's employment separation if: (1) the benefits were not received due to any fraud or willful misrepresentation by the claimant and (2) the employer did not participate in the initial proceeding to award benefits. The benefits were not received due to any fraud or willful misrepresentation by the claimant.

Additionally, the employer did not participate in the fact-finding interview. Thus, the claimant is not obligated to repay the agency the benefits she received.

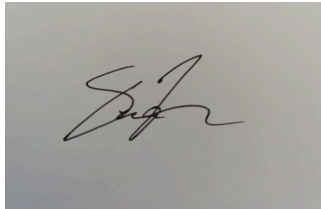
The law also states that an employer may be charged if "the employer failed to respond timely or adequately to the department's request for information relating to the payment of benefits. . ." Iowa Code § 96.3(7)(b)(1)(a). In this case, the employer did not participate in the fact-finding because it was not checking its mail regularly. The employer may be required to repay the benefits the claimant received because it did not participate due to its own fault.



**DECISION:**

The October 25, 2024, (reference 02) unemployment insurance decision is REVERSED. The claimant was discharged from employment for disqualifying misconduct on October 2, 2024. Benefits are withheld until such time as she has worked in and been paid wages for insured work equal to ten times her weekly benefit amount, provided she is otherwise eligible.

The claimant has been overpaid unemployment insurance benefits in the amount of \$404.00 but is not obligated to repay the agency those benefits. The employer did not participate in the fact-finding interview due to its own fault and its account may be charged.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is stylized and appears to read 'Sean M. Nelson'.

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Sean M. Nelson  
Administrative Law Judge II  
Iowa Department of Inspections, Appeals, & Licensing  
Administrative Hearings Division – UI Appeals Bureau

November 25, 2024  
Decision Dated and Mailed

smn/te

**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  
6200 Park Avenue Suite 100  
Des Moines, Iowa 50321  
Fax: (515)281-7191  
Online: [eab.iowa.gov](http://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  
6200 Park Avenue Suite 100  
Des Moines, Iowa 50321  
Fax: (515)281-7191  
Online: [eab.iowa.gov](http://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.