

'Sickies'

A new report highlights the increasing number of sick days taken by employees. But are all sick days legitimate? UK supermarkets are piloting a new plan to combat absenteeism.

1 What do you understand by the term 'taking a sickie'? Do you believe that sometimes people pretend to be sick in order to avoid going to work? If so, what excuses do they give their employers?

2 Can you guess the following two figures? Tick which you think are the correct answers.

Total number of sick days taken last year in the UK = **a)** 76 million **b)** 100 million **c)** 176 million
 Cost to UK companies of sick days = **a)** £5 billion **b)** £9 billion **c)** £11 billion

3 Read extract (b) from a letter sent to a personnel magazine and check your answers to exercise 2.

4 Then read all the extracts and decide which are written by employees and which are written by management.

<p>(a) Supermarkets are not to going to pay staff for the first few days they are sick. This is not fair. If you are sick, you are sick. This new plan will encourage those genuinely sick to struggle in to work and pass on their germs to others, so in the end, we will all lose.</p>	<p>(b) I welcome the new scheme being piloted by UK supermarkets – it should help cut down unauthorised absenteeism. Of the 176 million days taken sick last year by workers in the UK, as many as 15% were not genuine! This costs £11.6 billion a year! It's not fair for colleagues who have to cover, let alone us employers.</p>
<p>(c) At the medical centre where I work, we are allowed seven episodes of illness a year – then we are fired! Need I say that the number of sick days taken has fallen dramatically! People used to take days off for personal reasons, or just to have a long weekend. The new scheme is hard, but it works.</p>	<p>(d) Why not reward workers for unclaimed sick days? In my company, we receive \$100.00 for each day, so that's an extra \$600.00 a year for perfect attendance. There are fewer unexpected absences and there is less tracking by the management.</p>
<p>(e) In my opinion, many managers ignore the pressure on employees at work. This reduces morale and leads to long-term sickness, such as stress. I know that the figure for sick days taken is rising and the basic cause is bad management.</p>	<p>(f) We lose out due to our staff taking 'sickies'. We need to cover the work with fewer employees, so the whole workforce suffers. What will happen during Euro 2004? No doubt, more mysterious staff illnesses, just when the national team plays an important match!</p>

5 Which of the following words collocate with the word **absenteeism**?

(a) unauthorised **(b)** unexpected **(c)** sure **(d)** frequent **(e)** mysterious

6 Discuss the following questions in small groups and report your ideas to the class.

- (a)** Is absenteeism a problem in your country? Do people take 'sickies' for reasons other than being sick?
- (b)** Which ideas from the extracts do you think are good? Could any of them work in your company?
- (c)** If you were a personnel manager, how would you deal with 'sickies'?