

Background

The ultimate delivery service

Every day in chaotic Mumbai, a logistical miracle takes place. Teams of men wearing white hats deliver thousands of home-cooked lunches to office workers in the city. The lunch is contained in aluminium buckets called 'dabbas', and the men who deliver them are known as Dabbawallahs. What is amazing is that each dabba changes hands at least three times on its way. The system originated because there are so many different ethnic groups and castes, each with its own specific dietary needs and preferences. So instead of finding a restaurant, people prefer to have a hot midday meal sent from their homes directly to their offices. It is also up to fifteen times cheaper than eating out.

The Dabbawallahs are part of a sophisticated supply chain of deliverymen. They have no qualifications and are mostly illiterate. Yet despite this, and without computers or mobile phones, they deliver thousands of Dabbas to their hungry clients without fail, using a system of colour-coding and symbols on the tins. The network is so efficient that the business magazine, Forbes, gave it a six sigma performance rating, making it as reliable as Motorola or General Electric. All this despite the fact that a team of Harvard statisticians said that it was virtually impossible.

So how does it work? Let us take the case of Mr Rahman, an office worker. His Dabba has a black *swastika, a yellow dot and a red *slash. Elsewhere there is a white cross and black circle. The first symbols tell the Dabbawallahs the train station to go to, the line to take, and where to get off. The remaining ones indicate the district and the building and floor where they need to be delivered. At

10 a.m. the first Dabbawallah turns up to collect Mr Rahman's dabba from his wife at home. The dabba sets off on its journey. In the next half hour it is taken to a collection point and put into the correct batch according to its code. It is fast and accurate work.

Twenty minutes later, Dabbawallah 2 sorts them out, takes the dabbas marked with a black swastika, and cycles off to the station where Dabbawallah 3 picks up the ones with a yellow dot. He loads them onto a tray and boards the train at 11.05. The tray weighs fifty kilos and has room for 39 dabbas.

The red slash tells him where to get off, eighteen minutes later. Dabbawallah 4 is waiting at the station and takes the ones with his symbol, a white cross for his sector. We have now narrowed the delivery zone down to a single small district. The black circle on the tin tells him the exact details of the government building it has to go to. He goes up four flights of stairs and drops off the dabbas in their place in the canteen. By 12.30 Mr Rahman is tucking into his lunch.

To become a Dabbawallah you have to pay 30,000 rupees to the tiffin wallahs union. Afterwards you can earn just under eighty pounds a month – a good salary by Indian standards. It is a hazardous occupation riding a bicycle with a huge tray of dabbas, or rushing across busy roads to get to an office building on the other side. During the monsoon season Dabbawallahs have to wade through water to get to their customers. Sometimes there are awful accidents. Recently, a Dabbawallah was killed but his colleagues made sure that his dabba deliveries were only held up by half an hour.

Glossary

*slash = a /

*swastika = a symbol that means 'good luck' in India

Exercises

1 Work in groups. Discuss these questions.

- 1 What kind of things do you have delivered?
- 2 Do you have more or fewer deliveries since the Internet?
- 3 What is the service like? How could it be improved?

2 Read the first paragraph and answer these questions.

- 1 Which city is the article about?
- 2 What is a dabba and who is a Dabbawallah?
- 3 Why do office workers use the services of the Dabbawallah network?

3 Read the second paragraph and decide if these statements are true (T) or false (F).

- 1 Dabbas are delivered by the person who collects them.
- 2 Most Dabbawallahs can read and write.
- 3 They manage without sophisticated technology.
- 4 They exploit a system of colours and shapes.
- 5 They are as efficient as some top western companies.

4 Read paragraphs 3, 4, and 5 and makes notes about the duties of each Dabbawallah.

- Dabbawallah 1: _____
- Dabbawallah 2: _____
- Dabbawallah 3: _____
- Dabbawallah 4: _____

5 Read the final paragraph and list the advantages and disadvantages of this job?

- Advantages: _____
- Disadvantages: _____

6 Match words from the text to definitions 1–6.

- 1 a wonderful event that seems almost impossible _____
- 2 a class within Indian society you are born into _____
- 3 unable to read or write _____
- 4 a group of things that interconnect _____
- 5 reduced _____
- 6 the time of year when it rains a lot _____

7 Find phrasal verbs 1–5 in the text and match them to definitions a–e.

- | | |
|------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 turn up | a collect |
| 2 set off | b arrive / present yourself |
| 3 pick up | c organize / arrange |
| 4 sort out | d deliver |
| 5 drop off | e leave on a journey |

8 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

9 You want to adapt the dabbawallah concept for your city. Work in groups and discuss these questions.

- 1 How will you sell the idea to your customers?
- 2 Who will you employ?
- 3 How will you make sure meals are delivered on time?
- 4 How (if at all) will you use new technology to improve the service?