

Dabbawallah

1. Dabbawallah

“Dabba” is translated as box and “wallah” means man. Middle-class suburban housewives prepare 3-tiered lunch boxes known as dabbas or tiffins for their husbands, hard at work in the city. The meal is delivered direct to the workplace by one of the city’s dabbawallahs. The system is one of the oldest and unique basic-life services of Mumbai and only exists there and nowhere else in India or the world, for about 120 years. It is one of the best cases of supply chain management and one of the most amazing logistic systems in the world. The service does work without any computer-support and has a performance rate which is unrivalled in the world. Every day a crew of about 5,000 dabbawallahs deals with more than 150,000 lunch boxes. The delivery task is completed in just two hours between midday and 2pm. After 2pm the empty dabbas are collected and reversed back home. The service is so punctual and error-proof that there is only one mistake in 6,000,000 deliveries and there have not even been 100 complaints in 120 years. A dabbawallah earns about 2,000 rupees (40\$) per month and each customer is charged around 175 rupees (about 4\$) per month for the service. That is not much considering that each dabbawallah is working from 7am to 6pm and carries up to 30 dabbas.



The service was introduced in India under British rule, because many Indian people who worked for British companies disliked the British food served by the companies. A service was set up to bring the food from their home straight to their workplace. The profession of Dabbawallah was born. Nowadays, Indian businessmen are the main customers for the dabbawallahs and the service often includes cooking as well as delivery.

2. The System

The system operates using a zoning system. Mumbai is divided into many zones and each zone is served by a team of 20-25 dabbawallahs, each serving around 30 customers per day. Each team operates on its own and the team leader (called mukadam) is responsible for an efficient coordination of the team. The Dabbawallah System works as a self-regulating decentralized delivery system, loosely organized as a cooperative system, under the Nutan Tiffin Box Suppliers Association. There are only 3 hierarchies of authority, making a rather flat organisation with high efficiency. This includes about 5,000 workers, 800 mukadams and a small number of Executive Committee in the Association, which is primarily involved in conflict resolution and setting the agenda and administering the activities.



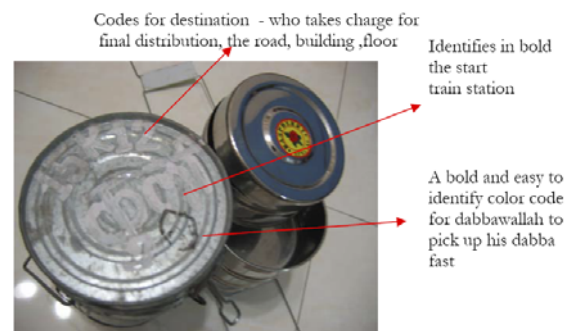
3. The Delivery

Most of the approximately 5,000 dabbawallahs come from poor regions of the state of Maharashtra, several hours from Mumbai. They all have left poor families, share a common language and have strong social bonds. They are proud in what they do and their livelihood

depends on their ability to deliver meals efficiently, come what may. One of the 23 rules of the corporate is “No customer should go without food”.

The delivery system builds on the extensive use of the Mumbai railway system, the backbone of the city connecting the vast suburbs to the city. The timetable of the railway system and the common delivery deadline for the dabbas induces a natural clockspeed into the delivery operations.

A dabba passes up to six dabbawallahs during its way from home to workplace or back again. One person picks the dabba up at home and brings it to the next railway station, where the next person is sorting the dabbas and sends them to the right destination via train and the next person. At the destination station the dabbas are unloaded and sorted again by another person. At least one person is delivering the dabba to its destination. All these logistic actions are based a spoke system combined with an easy code painted on the dabba top. This code uses color, dashes, crosses, dots and simple symbols which indicate the various parameters like suburb, route to take, destination station, the street, building, floor and door. This simple system ensures a smooth flow to and from destination, though a dabba passes 6 persons in each direction of movement everyday. The main reason for introducing this simple system based on colors and shapes was the circumstance that most of the poor men working as dabbawallahs are illiterates. Nowadays the system contains also simple numbers and letters.



Until now, this systems works without the need of computer-supported processes and that with a precision in time and an error rate below every modern logistic system based on the most modern computer systems and know-how.

4. References

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