

Case Example 6.2

Lunch delivery in Mumbai

For around 150–350 rupees a month (£2–£5), depending on location, workers in Mumbai can have their hot, home-cooked lunch delivered to their place of work every day. This service is used by factory workers, office workers, managers, students, even school-children. Around 8.00 in the morning they join the crowded trains, buses and roads to go to work or school in the city. Later that morning their wife, mother or maid prepares a hot meal of, for example, rice, dahl, naan bread, vegetable curry and maybe a sweet item. This is then carefully packed in a tiffin,² or tiffin box, a tubular-shaped tin with a handle, though many families now use modern colourful insulated lunch bags and boxes. The tiffin is then collected by a dabbawallah (tiffin worker) at around 10.30–11.00, and delivered to the hungry recipient by 12.30–1.00.

This door-to-door service is provided by the Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association (MTBSA). Within just two hours this network of around 5,000 dabbawallahs picks up and delivers 400,000 tiffins



every working day. Many of the dabbawallahs, recognisable in their Ghandi topis (small white caps), are uneducated and illiterate yet they form part of a vast complex delivery system that makes few errors. To aid correct delivery and return, each tiffin has a unique identifier painted on it, a series of coloured letters and numbers that identifies its home and destination.

In something resembling a relay race, a single tiffin is passed along a chain of up to ten different dabbawallahs as it makes its way from the apartment pick-up where one dabbawallah might be responsible for a whole block, to another who collects from a series of streets, to another who is responsible for a suburb, to another who takes them on the train or bus to the city centre. There are around four hubs in the city next to the train and bus stations, such as the area outside Churchgate Station, where dabbawallahs gather around midday to receive and sort thousands of tiffins, a process that only takes around 10–15 minutes. Each dabbawallah is responsible for locating, sorting and packing their tiffins into crates or onto their bike. They then move them swiftly through the crowded streets by foot, bike or cart to deliver them to their final destinations. Each dabbawallah can carry around 30 tiffins; they weigh around 2 kg each, though several sets or crates of tiffins may be loaded onto carts for the first leg of the journey from the hub. After lunch the dabbawallahs pick up the empty containers and return them through the hub to the dabbawallah who first picked up the tin for return the next morning when the next day's tiffin is collected. (Each customer needs two tiffins.)

All the 5,000 or so dabbawallahs are partners in the MTBSA. They each own a share in the business and have good pay and perks. All the dabbawallahs consider themselves to be shareholders and entrepreneurs. As one tiffin worker explained, 'It's our own business, we are partners; this is a high-status job. We earn more than many educated graduates!' Prospective dabbawallahs have to bring in capital if they wish to join the business. The minimum investment includes a bike, a crate for their tiffins and the topi.

MTBSA is a flat organisation with just three tiers. The top tier is the governing council (president, vice-president, general secretary, treasurer and nine directors), the second tier comprises the supervisors, or mukadams, and the third tier is the dabbawallahs. The dabbawallahs are organised into sub-groups of 15–25, each supervised by a mukadam. The mukadams are also responsible for dealing with disputes, maintaining records of receipts and payments, acquiring new customers and training the junior dabbawallahs. Money is collected from customers during the first week of the month and distributed evenly between the groups of dabbawallahs by the mukadam. Every month there are meetings to discuss customer service, and investigate and resolve any problems.³

Despite the large number of tiffins moved each day, the distances travelled, the multiple transfer points, the many handovers, zero documentation and the very short period of time in which it is all accomplished, there are rarely any mistakes. It has been estimated that there is only around one mistake per eight million deliveries.