

Dabbawalas of Mumbai Pre-Read: Information Organization
310 Case 6 Fall 2019 Pre-Read
Written by John King

The next case is the Dabbawalas of Mumbai. The transition through Arab Spring was not easy. You are getting better and faster. We now switch to one-week turnaround on the cases. The starting point for this is The Dabbawalas of Mumbai, Pratibha Rathore's "Indian Lunchbox System: Delivered On Time, Each Time." This is taken from a book formerly required for 310.¹ That book follows a formula that includes what is being organized, why it is being organized, how much of it is being organized, when it is being organized, and how or by whom it is being organized. The book provides a set of cases. Rathore's is one.

Not all stakeholders or interests are equally important. You cannot judge whether a stakeholder or interest is important until you have the full list. The early part of the course emphasized all the stakeholders and their interests. With the Aurolab case we began to think about how *important* stakeholders and interests are to the job. Paying clients are important, but others might be important too. As agent you don't do the impossible, like make a system unhackable. You lower the probability enough to be acceptable. Locked doors don't stop residential burglaries; they cause burglars to go to other houses where the doors aren't locked. This is a *requirements* issue. Don't make requirements harder than they need to be.

The cases up through Arab Spring require you to distinguish between infrastructure and information infrastructure. It is important to keep them separated. The electric power to run a computer in the Ushahidi case or the road an autonomous vehicle rides on might not be information infrastructure, but it is infrastructure. Information technology is becoming an increasing part of all infrastructure. Problems will show up because people do not have experience with infrastructure yet. In the Dabbawalas case there are many examples of infrastructure at work. Some are information infrastructure, but most are infrastructure.

"Infrastructure" refers to roads, trains and similar things. We seldom think about these because they are invisible until they break down (back to Star and Ruhleder). Roads are generic: trains run on *railroads*. Elevators are just railroads stood on end. (The tram in the Delta terminal at Detroit Metro airport was built by Otis, and is an elevator on its side.) Information professionals distinguish between infrastructure and information infrastructure. Information infrastructure often depends on other infrastructure (like electricity). With practice information professionals get faster at spotting the connections. As they learn more, it becomes easier. Once fast and good, information professionals have what business people call "comparative advantage."

There is too much information in the world to know it all. Search <rate of knowledge expansion> if you doubt the claim. There has been a general work speedup that might continue throughout your careers. You need to *learn fast*. Practice and

¹ Robert Glushko (ed) *The Discipline of Organizing*, <http://disciplineoforganizing.org/>.

become good at it. Practice all the time. This is where *kinda reading* comes in handy. To be a good *kinda reader* remember the relationship between *kinda reading* and *not reading*. Not reading something means you have no idea *that* something is there, much less the details. Not reading = not learning, which makes for bad information professionals. By kinda reading you know what to really read now or later as needed. Get good at deciding *on your own* whether to *really read* or *kinda read*. Find the linear narrative, look for parenthetical remarks (like this one) plus examples, sidebars, figures and tables, endnotes. Kinda reading is the beginning of really reading. Look ahead; see what you *must* understand in order to make sense. Become good at kinda reading. It is not a half-baked form of not reading. Done right, it helps you survive the work speedup.

Apply kinda reading skills to The Dabbawalas of Mumbai. Separate really read; from kinda read from don't read. Do what journalists do: look for who, what, when, where, why? Make sense of The Dabbawalas of Mumbai for your supervisor, the other members of your team, the GSIs – whoever you think of as the “client” for this work. Start with Pratibha Rathore's paper, but note that *you cannot do this case using only Rathore's paper*. Look on-line at YouTube and other videos, articles, *etc.* Search <dabbawala>, <indian lunchbox>, <Mumbai hot lunch delivery>, *etc.* You won't find anything useful if you don't search. The references that help will probably be *fewer* than the things you look at. Leave stuff on the cutting room floor.

List all stakeholders you can think of. Take out those who don't matter. Distinguish between non-information infrastructure and information infrastructure. Pay special attention to situations where information infrastructure is important for non-information infrastructure and vice-versa. Build speed, but not at the cost of quality. Capture your thoughts on screen, paper, *etc.*

Previous cases were “greenfield.” The term comes from real estate development, meaning land not burdened with prior development or contaminated with hazardous materials (“brownfield”). Greenfield jobs are rare. A new team member joining a team working on X should ask about X. History matters. Go back to the most recent common denominator to see stakeholders and interests in context, infrastructure, requirements, *etc.*) Don't infuriate new co-workers by telling them their work is junk, even if it is junk. If there are problems, steer things toward a fix. Success has many parents; failure is an orphan. If they think you really know, they'll follow. If the work is awesome, know how and why. If something important is missing, suggest how it might be included. Supplement inadequate information by searching. Leaders are worth following. Be a leader.

Assignment

Your job is to address the following for The Dabbawalas of Mumbai. This should be familiar to you; it's in the syllabus. You still have only 350 words. Some things are likely to be more important than others. Do your best.

- Stakeholder interests in the context of a problem.
- Information infrastructure (this usually requires infrastructural inversion).

- Implications for solving or not solving the problem.
- Factors (including organizational and institutional) that must be considered.
- Solutions for relevant stakeholders.
- Presentation that convinces stakeholders about solutions.

The Dabbawalas of Mumbai in Context

Astute students have asked about the Dabbawalas case in context of 310. The Arab Spring case is the “capstone,” the most challenging case of the set. (Those who do the extra Hawaii Missile case might find that challenging, too.) Dabbawalas is less challenging. We’re on the downslope! The case illustrates information organization, important but no longer central to 310. The “deliverables” for Dabbawalas come from the syllabus. The terms should be routine. In this checklist not everything is equally important. Why make The Dabbawalas of Mumbai case harder than it ought to be? If it ain’t broken, why fix it? This case doesn’t need much “help” from you. Those involved (the Dabbawalas) might have already “solved” the problems. What problems might those be? And if they have solved the problems, how they did so might be worth concentrating on.

Information Organization and The Dabbawalas

See the [Wikipedia](#) entry on dabbawallas. Search <dabbawala video> and you’ll find lots of videos. Parse dabbawala: “dabba” = cylindrical lunchbox; “wala” delivers the dabba. For our purposes, dabbawala in English means “lunch box delivery man.” Most dabbawalas come from a particular sect. There are about 5000 of them. They deliver about 200,000 meals per day, six days a week. They seldom make mistakes. Most dabbawalas make less than USD 150/month. Subscribers pay less than USD 15/month for this service.

Lunch boxes are marked with simple codes since many dabbawalas are illiterate. The codes designate pickup addresses (homes or lunch providers), starting railroad station (aggregation of boxes coming from particular places and departure points for the train trip); destination station (disaggregation points after the train trip and departure for the last mile of the journey); and final destination address (building, floor and recipient name).

Dabbawalas collect the boxes on foot or bicycle from a home or lunch maker, sort them into groups for the train, put them on the right train for their destination, take them off at the right railway station, and carry them on foot or by bicycle to the destination. Empty boxes are sent back to their origins. Some dabbawalas take delivery requests through text messages on cellphones.

The focus is information organization. Most “information work” is in information organization. Codes guide the lunch boxes from origin to destination. The key stakeholders and their interests in context should be readily obvious – lunch maker, dabbawala, lunch eater. There might be some others. Do they matter? Requirements are pretty straight forward: getting the lunches collected, delivered to the right

destination, and getting the empties back. But many dabbawalas are illiterate, so lengthy written descriptions won't work. They use codes, but the codes evoke other *infrastructure* things. The dabbas go on bicycles (there have to be bicycle makers, distributors, fixers, not to mention dabbawalas who know how to ride them, etc.) and trains (see below). The dabbawalas themselves are part of the infrastructure: they must know the addressing schemes, the train routes, schedules and rules, protocols to be followed in collecting/delivering lunch boxes and returning empties, and at least enough to ride a bicycle and a train.

The dabbawalas seldom make mistakes like failing to pick up or deliver food as they are supposed to. In part this is because the information infrastructure works: the coding schemes are effective, trains go where they are supposed to go, dabbawalas know the city. Information is used to determine addresses and people for collecting and delivering, but the dabbawalas have to "learn how" when someone new comes on as a subscriber, and they have to "forget" those who leave. The service started in the 19th century, long before computers, cellphones, etc. The service obviously does not *need* that stuff, but might use it now. Information infrastructure has been around since long before those things came along. Would "computerizing" any of this system help?

Colonial Infrastructure

A lot of the infrastructure in The Dabbawalas of Mumbai case started when India was a British colony (1858-1947). If the infrastructure was built a long time ago in the colonial era but has been maintained and used, it is probably pretty useful. You cannot understand the Dabbawalas of Mumbai without understanding something about the trains of Mumbai. Doing that is easy with the Internet! Go to YouTube and search <Mumbai railway>. You'll find among other videos including a series, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6nKHZwxr-c>. This is a good BBC production about Mumbai trains there. The stations can be very crowded. Sometimes there are stampedes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOXpHpjJlEI>.

What do you care about the trains in Mumbai? Normally, nothing (unless you live in Mumbai and take the train). But you are working on The Dabbawalas of Mumbai case. This is part of the story. If you cannot understand the Dabbawalas of Mumbai without understanding something about the trains of Mumbai, learn about the trains of Mumbai. The Internet makes that easy. Start from where you are.