

# Global package race puts major carriers to the test

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How hard is it to deliver a package to Ouagadougou? A group from the Supply Chain and Logistics Institute in the H. Milton Stewart School of Industrial and Systems Engineering at Georgia Tech, one of the most respected logistics programs in the world, puts the major carriers (UPS, FedEx and DHL) to the test every year with its Great Package Race, a contest to see which carrier can get a package to a very challenging locale the fastest and in the best condition.

A group of 60 logistics students, led by logistics expert John Bartholdi, a professor in the Stewart School, sends identical boxes bound for places like Lomé, Togo and Split, Croatia. With no indication that there's a competition underway, each carrier picks up its parcel, and the race begins. The progress of the packages is tracked online and students follow the often byzantine journey (across oceans, rivers and jungles and sometimes by bicycle) from Atlanta, Georgia, to a location that may not even have an official street address.

Admittedly, the race is an extreme test of the carriers' ability to deliver anywhere in the world, Bartholdi said. This year's packages were sent on April 13 to Yangon, Myanmar (formerly Burma); Tikrit, Iraq (one of the centers of Sunni insurgency); Florianopolis, Brazil (a small island); Harare, Zimbabwe and Apia, Samoa. Most packages arrived with a week or two, but one has yet to be delivered or returned.

DHL beat the competition this year, delivering first to three of the five locations and second to the remaining two. FedEx managed to deliver to

three locations, and UPS delivered parcels to two. The remaining packages from FedEx and UPS went undelivered for a variety of reasons. In past races, the carriers traded wins in different locales.

While carriers usually have no trouble getting the package to the general vicinity of the package address, the last part of the package's journey slows things down considerably.

"The world's not quite flat," Bartholdi said. "The last mile is always the hardest."

The race results are often mixed and entertaining. Two carriers once showed up at the exact same time to deliver their packages. One package was carried back-and-forth across the Atlantic nine times before delivery. Another was sent to Costa Rica instead of Croatia. And one carrier claimed that the destination country didn't exist at all.

Bartholdi started the Great Package Race back in 2003 as a fun exercise for his logistics students. Each package provided a window into how the carriers operate, revealing everything from which hubs carriers route packages through to what types of operations functions can go wrong when a package is shipped internationally.

The carriers themselves are good sports about the race and sometimes communicate with the students about what went wrong and what went right, Bartholdi said.

The packages, containing Georgia Tech goodies such as a shirt and mug, are sent to the group's friends and acquaintances all over the world, provided that their addresses present a suitably sadistic challenge for the carriers.

Source: Georgia Institute of Technology

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