



Using the bullet train to carry freight has been mooted for years | Photo source [Fikri Rasyid on Unsplash](#)

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JAPANESE BULLET TRAINS TO CARRY FREIGHT IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

● MOBILITY & TRANSPORT

Delivery company Sagawa Express is teaming up with Hokkaido Railway to use empty seats on the trains for packages

Spotted: Japan's high-speed rail, the *shinkansen*, opened in 1964. Up to now, the bullet trains have only carried passengers; while using the trains for freight has long been mooted, the extra costs involved in setting up dedicated freight carriages and cargo terminals has meant that the plans never took off. Now, however, the possibility of using trains to send packages is being seriously considered.

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The idea has gained new urgency as the nation struggles to find enough long-distance truck drivers amid the chronic nationwide shortage, due to the coronavirus crisis. Delivery company Sagawa Express is teaming up with Hokkaido Railway, a Japan Railways group company, to use empty seats on the trains for packages.

Home delivery has been growing rapidly in Japan, as delivery by courier services reached 4.3 billion packages in 2018. At the same time, there are three truck driving jobs for every applicant, which is hampering the growth of the industry. Sagawa, which currently uses ferries to transport packages between Honshu and Hokkaido, hopes that using the bullet train will allow faster delivery times and increase capacity.

Kyushu Railway, which serves the southernmost island of Kyushu, also hopes to launch a shinkansen freight service. The service, planned for 2021, will use one car of every train to transport freight

during off-peak times when there are fewer passengers.

As people order more goods for home delivery, logistics companies have had to adapt rapidly in order to keep growing. Springwise has recently seen a number of innovations in this space, which aim to improve logistics to allow more rapid delivery and greater volume. These innovations include using AI to optimise [ship navigation](#) and reusable [packaging](#) containers.

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8th April 2020

Website: sagawa-exp.co.jp

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Takeaway:

The use of passenger cars for freight could help the shinkansen railways to generate additional revenue, although the use of the trains for parcels will mostly be relegated to lines and times when passenger use is low. The model may not be feasible for the busiest lines, such as Tokaido Shinkansen Line, which links Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka. Cost also remains a major challenge. Using the high-speed trains for freight could cost up to 490 per cent more than shipping by truck. However, carrying freight by shinkansen could also allow the development of a new market for super-rush delivery services targeting businesses.