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Postal services - Harmonized track and trace events - Part 2: Return flow

Postalische Dienstleistungen - Harmonisierte track and trace Ereignisse

Services postaux - Opérations harmonisées de suivi et de localisation - Partie 2 : Processus de retour

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03.240	Poštne storitve	Postal services

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Postal services - Harmonized track and trace events - Part 2: Return flow

Services postaux - Opérations harmonisées de suivi et de localisation - Partie 2 : Processus de retour

Postalische Dienstleistungen - Harmonisierte track and trace Ereignisse

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European foreword

This document (CEN/TS 18055-2:2026) has been prepared by Technical Committee CEN/TC 320 “Transport, Logistics and Postal Services”, the secretariat of which is held by AFNOR.

Attention is drawn to the possibility that some of the elements of this document may be the subject of patent rights. CEN shall not be held responsible for identifying any or all such patent rights.

This document has been prepared under a standardization request addressed to CEN by the European Commission. The Standing Committee of the EFTA States subsequently approves these requests for its Member States.

Any feedback and questions on this document should be directed to the users’ national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found on the CEN website.

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Introduction

E-Commerce is a very large industry today and it keeps growing rapidly all over the world. *E-Commerce* relies on *logistic service providers (LSPs)* for both the deliveries of orders and *parcel*s to their intended *recipients* and the return flows coming back from intended *recipients*.

CEN/TS 18055-1 describes a set of harmonized events that can be used to provide visibility of the whereabouts of the *parcel* in a way that is consistent and easy-to-understand for the *sender* and *recipient* of the *parcel* regardless of how many and which *LSP* are involved in the delivery (forward flow) of the *parcel*.

This document focuses on the business requirements related to the return flows of *parcel*s and what that means for the provision of harmonized events similar to the previous CEN work for the forward flow. Return flows are an issue for many (online) retailers and the *LSP*.

In a recent study (by Blue Yonder) [7], 68 % of merchants across *E-Commerce* reported that return rates have increased over the past 12 months, and 63 % confirmed that returns are a "significant" or "very significant" problem for their business.

To further support that observation, a recent DHL Trend Report on E-Commerce [9] highlighted that 54 % of online shoppers return items at least "a few times" per year[1)].

Not all of the challenges within the context of return flows are related to the harmonized events that this document will cover. However, international track and trace capabilities are a crucial element of cross border *E-Commerce* also for the return flows. Effective, reliable and trustworthy track and trace events are needed in this context also because the products contained in a returned *parcel* can represent significant value for both the *recipient* returning the goods and the *E-Commerce company* (merchant) who sent the goods in the first place. Therefore, original *recipients* as well as merchants are keen on following their returned order via track and trace services.

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These services, the events provided, their descriptions and the quality of these events vary from *LSP* to *LSP*.

This leads to an opaque returns supply chain with limited or no visibility on the progress of the returned *E-Commerce* item on its way to its destination, causing uncertainty for the original *recipients* as well as the merchants, increasing call centre calls and costs whilst reducing the trust in cross border *e-Commerce* services.

In some cases, over 20 events with unclear descriptions, or even repetitive descriptions that make no sense to the original *recipient* of the *E-Commerce* item or to the merchant are shared.

An increase of the quality of track and trace services with a focus on the *recipient* and merchant, will lead to an increase of consumer trust and supply chain cost reductions. In turn, this will lead to growth of cross border *E-Commerce* both internationally and domestically.

This document will focus on events related to cross border E-commerce to and from Europe, to and from non-European countries as well as cross border E-commerce within Europe. A generic increase of trust in cross border *E-Commerce* will be beneficial for the flows within Europe, potentially leading to an increase in cross border trade within the European Union.

The main purpose of this document is to provide a minimum set of progress updates (events) that are well-defined and easy to understand for the original recipient of the returned e-commerce items and the e-commerce company associated with those items.

[1)] DHL 2025 E-Commerce Trends Report page 33 (37% a few times + 17 at least once a month).

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Why do recipients and E-Commerce companies want specific Events to be recorded?

— To have the independent evidence for the original *recipient* that the *parcel* or goods has/have been returned. That evidence would

  — entitle the original *recipient* to a refund for the goods;

  — transfer responsibility for the goods/*parcel* to the *LSP*.

— To have the "proof" that the returned *parcel* has reached the place agreed/decided by the original sender (the *return location*).

— To have harmonized events related to the transportation chain of the returned *parcel* that make sense to the consumer/merchant.

The starting point for defining this set of events is the consumer buying the goods to the *E-Commerce company*. Therefore, in this document, when describing the individual events related to the progress of the return of an *E-Commerce* item, the language used is the language of the consumer.

This stands in contrast to most other technical specifications for events that take the perspective of the *LSPs* and therefore assume a level of knowledge about transport and logistics operations that is simply not there with consumers. Furthermore, this Technical Specification aims to describe only the events that deliver the most useful information to the consumer and the *E-Commerce company*.

It is up to the *LSP* how to run its business, and internal standards are in place for the management of internal processes. Internal events are considered to be of no interest to a *recipient*, with the exception of some of the *last mile* events which are mentioned later in this document.

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This document contains a list of 11 track and trace events for *LSPs* to share with the original *recipients* of *E-Commerce items* or the merchant associated with those items to update them regarding the progress of delivery execution.

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Clause 6 describes these events in detail. Clause 5 covers the most common scenarios that cause the *parcel*s or goods to be returned to the merchant. The events most useful for merchant and/or original *recipient* will vary across the scenarios. For each scenario a table of the most useful events is provided.

The document also includes a description of the basic data set for these events. Clause 8 provides more detail on that.

This short list of events (defined from the original *recipient* and merchant perspective) can be a starting point for *LSPs* currently not providing any tracking events as well as a reference for *LSPs* improving the transparency of their track and trace solution also for the return flows.

Although this document has been developed with *E-Commerce* and cross border *shipments* in mind, harmonization of track and trace events can also benefit other logistic flows, such as domestic *shipments* and direct (offline) shop orders, which can include transport units larger than *parcels*.

Therefore, this document can be applicable for goods flows and *parcel* flows outside the scope of cross-border *E-Commerce* that this document covers. E.g. a number of the events mentioned can be applied also in domestic contexts and/or for transportation of goods that have been traded without using the Internet.

In general, an *LSP* will have identified and defined events for itself. Therefore, it is fully expected that *LSPs* will need to translate or map their own events to the events defined in this document.

Annex A contains a mapping of these 11 events to a number of track and trace event lists currently in wide use. Annex A is in no way intended to be comprehensive; many *LSPs* will need to make the mapping from their own event set to the set in this document for themselves.

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1 Scope

This document covers the track and trace events for the return flow of *e-Commerce* items, more specifically, the events that are most useful to the original *recipient* (if any) and the *E-Commerce company* that sent the item in the first place.

It provides a minimum set of events formulated in language that is understood by sellers and buyers of *E-Commerce* products. The *logistic service providers* (*LSPs*) involved can "map" their own internal events to the events described in this document.

A return flow is always linked to a forward flow that is the subject of CEN/TS 18055-1.

This document aims to describe only those events that are related to the returns flow. Therefore, this document defines and describes the exact moment that the forward flows stop and the associated return flow starts.

This document covers the following four cases of return flows:

— unsuccessful delivery (item remains in possession of the last mile operator);

— return to sender or equivalent party (delivered and later returned parcel);

— a service for recipients to send (parts of) a received shipment back;

— returns caused by failure to meet regulatory or cross-border procedure requirements.

Each of these cases will be covered in separate clauses of the document.

NOTE There are some processes in case 3 that need to occur before the *parcel* enters into the Returns Flow and they are generally executed by the *E-Commerce company* (or a party acting on its behalf)[2)].

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This document will not describe those "precursor" processes in any detail, but it will describe the minimum requirements in terms of information needed by the first *LSP* to be able to start to execute the Return Flow effectively and efficiently. The precursor process is similar to the RMA (= Return Materials Authorization) process used in business-to-business environments.

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This document does not cover the logistical flows within the facilities of the producers and sellers of the items. These fall outside the responsibility of the CEN/TC 331 domain.

This document does not cover all events necessary for an *LSP* to track items within its own facilities.

2 Normative references

There are no normative references in this document.

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions apply.

ISO, IEC and UN/CEFACT maintain terminology databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

— ISO Online browsing platform: available at https://www.iso.org/obp/

— IEC Electropedia: available at https://www.electropedia.org/

[2)] Some *LSP* in some geographies offer a service (agreed with an *E-Commerce company*) that will allow the recipient of a *parcel* to directly interact with the *LSP* to initiate the return flow of *parcel*s back to the *E-Commerce company.*

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