Shipping containers

A shipping container is a large metal box that sits on a truck, train or ship. It may look simple, but this box made globalization possible.

The history of the shipping container goes back to 1956.

Malcolm McLean had a trucking company in America. His business was good, but he wanted to make it better. He looked at the shipping industry and saw a problem.

In those days, shipping was slow. A truck would drive to a port. Workers moved boxes by hand from the truck to a ship. When the ship arrived at a new port, more workers moved boxes by hand.

Malcolm's idea was simple. Put products inside a container. At a port, big machines would move containers between trucks, trains and ships. Moving small boxes by hand was no longer necessary.

During the 1970s and 1980s, container shipping became popular. Ports with the special equipment needed to lift containers were built around the world.

How did shipping containers change business? First, shipping became cheaper and faster. Before Malcolm's idea, the cost of shipping was $59 per tonne. Shipping by container is about 16 cents per tonne.

Before containers, the average port worker could load 1.7 tonnes per hour. With containers, that average was 30 tonnes.

Containers move large volumes of material. For example, one 40-foot container can hold 320 televisions, or 5000 pairs of pants, or 100 washing machines.

Another change was employment. Before containers, businesses manufactured lots of products in North America and Europe. That has changed. Companies now open factories in low cost Asian countries and transport products everywhere. Jobs are created in Asia. Jobs are lost in western countries.

For good or bad, globalization has transformed the world by making shipping more efficient. That change was possible because of one man and a metal box.