

The parties in trade and logistics

Exporter, forwarder, NVOCC, shipowner, agent, customs broker: who does what, and which document do they issue?

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SHORT ANSWER

An international shipment involves the two trading parties (seller and buyer) and the intermediaries who serve them. The freight forwarder organises the transport; the carrier (the shipping line operating the vessel) moves the cargo; an NVOCC acts as a carrier and issues its own bill of lading without operating ships; the shipping agent represents the carrier in port; and the customs broker files the customs declaration. Who is liable to whom is decided by the contracts between them and the documents issued.

Why start with the parties?

On its way from the seller's warehouse to the buyer's, a load often passes through the hands of ten different companies. When something goes wrong, the first question is always the same: **who is liable to whom, under which contract?** Answering it starts with knowing each party's role and the documents between them.

We look at the parties in three groups: **the trading parties** (who buy and sell the goods), **the transport parties** (who carry the goods or organise the carriage) and **the support services** (customs, banks, insurance, surveyors).

Map of the parties

The map shows a typical containerised export by sea.

Party	Role	Contracts with	Documents
Seller / shipper	Sells the goods and (under the C and D rules) makes the contract of carriage. Appears as shipper on the bill of lading.	Buyer (sales contract), forwarder or carrier (contract of carriage)	Commercial invoice, packing list, shipping instructions, VGM
Customs broker (origin)	Files the export declaration on the shipper's behalf.	Shipper (agency agreement)	Export declaration

Party	Role	Contracts with	Documents
Road haulier (pre-carriage)	Collects the empty container from the depot, brings it to the loading point and delivers the full container to the terminal.	Forwarder or carrier (merchant / carrier haulage)	Waybill / CMR note
Freight forwarder	Organises the transport: books space, prepares documents, coordinates trucking, customs and insurance. If it issues its own bill of lading it may be liable as a carrier.	Shipper or buyer (customer); shipping line (space purchase)	House B/L (HBL), FBL, booking confirmation
NVOCC	Acts as a carrier without operating ships; buys space from shipping lines and issues its own bill of lading.	Customer and shipping line	House B/L
Shipping line / carrier	Operates the vessel and carries the cargo from port to port.	The shipper on the bill of lading (often the forwarder)	Master B/L (MBL), sea waybill, arrival notice
Shipping agent	Represents the carrier in port; handles bookings, bills of lading, delivery orders and port formalities.	Carrier (agency agreement)	Bill of lading (on behalf of the carrier), delivery order
Terminal operator	Loads, discharges and stores containers; charges storage.	Carrier (handling); cargo owner (storage)	Gate-in / gate-out (EIR) records
Buyer / consignee	Buys the goods and takes delivery at destination. Makes the contract of carriage under the F rules.	Seller (sales contract)	L/C application, import documents
Notify party	The party the carrier informs on arrival. Has no right to take delivery.	—	Receives the arrival notice
Customs broker (destination)	Files the import declaration for the buyer, pays duties and clears the cargo.	Buyer	Import declaration
Banks	Examine documents and handle payment in letters of credit and documentary collections.	Buyer (issuing bank), seller (beneficiary)	Letter of credit, payment instruction
Insurer and surveyor	The insurer issues the policy and pays claims; the surveyor establishes the cause and amount of the loss.	The insured (seller or buyer)	Insurance policy / certificate, survey report

The trading parties

- **Shipper:** The party that hands the cargo to the carrier under the contract of carriage. Usually the exporter, but not always; in an EXW sale, for example, the buyer's forwarder may appear as shipper on the bill of lading.
- **Consignee:** The party entitled to take delivery at destination. In letter of credit transactions the bill of lading is often made out to a bank's order, which then has to endorse it.
- **Notify party:** The party the carrier informs when the cargo arrives. It is only informed; it has no right to take delivery.

The parties to the sales contract (seller and buyer) and the parties to the contract of carriage (shipper and carrier) do not have to be the same people. The Incoterms rule decides who makes the contract of carriage: the buyer under the F rules, the seller under the C and D rules.

The transport parties

Carrier / shipowner: The company that operates the vessel and physically carries the cargo. Companies running scheduled container services are called liner carriers. The carrier issues its own bill of lading, the master B/L (MBL).

Freight forwarder: Organises the transport on the customer's behalf. It chooses the carrier, books space, prepares documents and coordinates trucking, customs and insurance from a single point. When a forwarder issues a bill of lading in its own name (house B/L, HBL), it can take on carrier-like liability towards its customer.

NVOCC (Non-Vessel Operating Common Carrier): Acts as a carrier without operating ships. It buys space from shipping lines and gives its customers its own bill of lading. The term comes from US regulation; in practice many forwarders are also NVOCCs.

Shipping agent: Represents the carrier in a port. It handles bookings, issues bills of lading and delivery orders and manages port formalities.

Terminal operator and stevedores: Load containers onto vessels, discharge them and store them at the terminal. The terminal operator charges storage.

Road and rail carriers: Bring the container to the port (pre-carriage) and take it from the port to the consignee (on-carriage).

Support services

- **Customs broker:** A licensed professional who files customs declarations on behalf of the declarant. In Türkiye, customs brokers are authorised by the Ministry of Trade; a company may file its own declarations, but in practice most work with a customs broker.
- **Banks:** Examine documents and handle payment in letters of credit and documentary collections.
- **Insurer:** Issues the cargo insurance policy, pays the claim when there is a loss and then recovers from the carrier.
- **Surveyor:** Establishes the cause and amount of a loss; may also carry out pre-shipment inspections.

3PL and 4PL

A **3PL (third-party logistics)** provider carries out logistics services such as warehousing, distribution and transport on a customer's behalf. A **4PL** coordinates the whole supply chain for a customer, managing several 3PLs and carriers, usually without assets of its own. These terms are not defined identically across the industry, so the scope should always be written into the quotation and contract.

Test yourself

1. A forwarder issued its own bill of lading to its customer, and the cargo was damaged in transit. Who does the customer claim against first? *(Answer: The forwarder that issued the bill of lading. The forwarder then claims against the shipping line under its own contract.)*
2. Can the notify party take delivery of the cargo? *(Answer: No. The notify party is only informed; the right to take delivery belongs to the consignee or the lawful holder of the bill of lading.)*
3. Who makes the contract of carriage in an FOB sale? *(Answer: The buyer. Under the F rules the buyer arranges and pays for the main carriage.)*

Frequently asked questions

What is the difference between a freight forwarder and a carrier?

The carrier operates the vessel and physically moves the cargo. The freight forwarder organises the transport on the customer's behalf: it chooses the carrier, books space and coordinates documents and services such as customs, insurance and trucking. When a forwarder issues its own bill of lading (HBL), it can take on carrier-like liability towards its customer.

What is an NVOCC?

An NVOCC (Non-Vessel Operating Common Carrier) acts as a carrier and issues its own bill of lading without operating ships. It buys space from shipping lines and contracts with its customers in its own name. The term comes from US regulation; many forwarders also operate as NVOCCs.

Who is the notify party?

The party the carrier informs when the cargo arrives at the port of discharge, often the buyer or the buyer's customs broker. Being the notify party does not give a right to take delivery; when the bill of lading is made out to a bank's order, the notify party is usually how the buyer is reached.

SOURCES

FIATA — International Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations — <https://fiata.org/>

Turkish Ministry of Trade — customs procedures and customs brokers — <https://ticaret.gov.tr/>

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