



Methodology

Rating Telecommunications

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Insight beyond the rating.

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Note: DBRS provides third-party, independent evaluations in four major areas: the corporate sector, financial institutions, public finance and structured finance. The corporate sector consists of a wide variety of industries.



I. Overview

DBRS ratings are opinions that reflect the creditworthiness of an issuer, a security or an obligation. They are opinions based on forward-looking measurements that assess a company's ability and willingness to make timely payments on outstanding obligations (whether principal, interest or dividend) with respect to the terms of an obligation. Ratings are not buy, hold or sell recommendations and they do not address the market price of a security.

DBRS rating methodologies include consideration of general business and financial risk factors applicable to most industries in the corporate sector, as well as industry-specific issues and more subjective factors, nuances and intangible considerations. Our approach is not based solely on statistical analysis but includes a combination of both quantitative and qualitative considerations. The considerations outlined in DBRS methodologies are not intended to be exhaustive. In certain cases, a major strength can compensate for a weakness that would be more critical for a peer company. Conversely, there are cases where one weakness is so critical that it overrides the fact that the company may be strong in most other areas.

DBRS rating methodology is underpinned by a stable rating philosophy, which means that in order to minimize the rating changes due primarily to global economic changes, DBRS generally factors the impact of a cyclical economic environment into its rating. Consequently, DBRS takes a longer-term "through the cycle" view of a company and, as such, rating changes are not based solely on normal economic cycles. Rating revisions do occur, however, when it is clear that a structural change, either positive or negative, has transpired or appears likely to transpire in the near future. An equally important aspect of DBRS analysis is its broad industry coverage, which it undertakes in order to understand the major differences and subtle nuances within a particular industry and to form an appropriate rating of a company relative to its competitors.

As a framework, DBRS rating methodologies consist of three components that together form the basis of the rating: an assessment of the company's general business risk profile based on cross-industry and macro business considerations; an assessment of the company's financial risk profile primarily based on quantitative ratio analysis; and consideration of industry-specific factors and measures particularly unique to the company. To some extent, the business risk and financial risk profiles are inter-related. The degree of financial risk considered acceptable for a company depends to a large measure on the business risks it faces.

Critical in the determination of a rating is the application of the analyst's experience and expertise in forming an initial rating opinion and recommendation for the rating committee and the role of the DBRS rating committee as the final decision maker. DBRS rating committees, which comprise experienced and knowledgeable DBRS personnel, strive to provide objective and independent rating decisions which are based upon all relevant information and factors, incorporate both global and local considerations, apply DBRS-approved methodologies and reflect the opinion of DBRS.

II. General Business Risk Profile

A fundamental component of DBRS analysis is the consideration of macro business factors that apply to most, if not all, industries within the corporate sector. The general business risk profile is largely a qualitative assessment of the environment a company is affected by and operates in. An assessment of the general business risk profile serves as a backdrop for the analysis of the company's financial risk profile as well as other qualitative and quantitative factors that are particularly unique to the company. Differing business risk profiles impact the assessment of a company's financial risk profile, and thus, it is important to understand the extraneous influences and business factors a company is or could be affected by despite its financial strength.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN EVALUATING A COMPANY'S BUSINESS RISK PROFILE

The following considerations, while not intended to be an exhaustive list, indicate the key areas DBRS considers in evaluating a company's business risk profile:

Economic Environment

The importance of the industry within the overall economy, in terms of either how it impacts or is impacted by the economy and shapes a company's viability. Also of importance is how the industry is influenced by current economic factors such as inflation or deflation, supply and demand, interest rates, currency swings and demographics.

Legislative and Regulatory Environment

Whether an industry is regulated or not is key, as the degree of regulation and legislative oversight can severely restrict or assist a company depending on its stage of growth, industry influence and regulatory relations. A regulated industry imposes a certain rigour and governance. It is also important to understand the frequency of change or stability in industry rules and whether regulations may require companies to make costly modifications to their infrastructure.

Competitive Environment

The nature of the market structure (e.g., monopoly versus oligopoly) determines the extent of competitiveness and the barriers to entry a company may face. Many industries are undergoing significant structural changes such as consolidation or deconsolidation, excess capacity or competitive threats from new capacity in "low-cost" countries such as China, Brazil, and Russia in both domestic and international markets. Even small changes in the competitive environment can have a profound impact on a company.

Country Risk

Governments often intervene in their economies and occasionally make substantial changes in policy regarding competition, ownership, wage and price controls, restrictions on foreign currency, capital and imports/exports, among other things. Such policy changes can significantly affect a company, and therefore, considerations include the company's main location or country of operation, the extent of government intervention and support, and the degree of economic and political stability. The assessment of country risk is not limited to direct government actions to interfere with the private sector, but also encompasses the full range of financial and economic events that can spill across a country, causing widespread defaults in otherwise healthy corporate credits. As such, country risk can have considerable implications for corporate ratings. A country ceiling is assigned to corporate foreign currency ratings based on the country's susceptibility to systemic shocks and the private sector's ability to maintain its foreign currency debt payments when shocks occur.

Industry Cyclicalities

Cyclicalities is influenced by factors such as levels of consumer spending, consumer confidence and the strength of the economy. The degree of cyclicalities is influenced by the market segment in which a company specializes. Non-cyclical industries are better able to withstand dramatic economic changes, as are companies with more predictable cycles, than those with significant peaks and troughs. It is important to examine a company's strategies and performance over the longer term and understand them in cyclical highs and lows.

Management

The capability and strength of management is a pivotal factor in company success. An objective profile of management can be obtained by assessing the following: the appropriateness of core strategies; rigour of key policies, processes and practices; management's reaction to problem situations; its appetite for growth, either organically by adding new segments or through acquisition; its ability to smoothly integrate acquisitions without business disruption; and its track record in achieving financial results. Retention strategies and succession planning for senior roles are also critical considerations.

Corporate Governance

Effective corporate governance requires a healthy tension between management, the board of directors and the public. There is no one "right" approach for all companies. A good board can have a profound impact on growing companies, those in fragile financial states or those undergoing significant change. Beyond a review of management, assessment should focus on the appropriateness of board composition and structure (including the independence and expertise of the audit committee) to approve executive compensation and corporate strategy, and to oversee execution and opportunities for management self-interest. Other important areas include the extent of disclosure of financial and non-financial information (including aggressiveness of accounting practices and control weaknesses), share ownership (including director's) and shareholder rights.

III. General Financial Risk Profile

The financial risk profile is largely a quantitative assessment of the company's financial strength and an estimation of its future performance and financial profile. DBRS reviews three key areas: earnings, cash flow, and additional measures for balance sheet and financial flexibility. Within each area, DBRS focuses on key metrics and considerations which are assessed over time, noting that the trend in the ratios is also important to the rating. However, ratios alone cannot be used as an absolute test of financial strength. With a focus on future expectations, the primary goal of financial risk assessment is to understand the inter-relationship between the numbers, interpret what they mean and determine what they indicate about the company's ability to service and repay debt on a timely basis given the industry background.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN EVALUATING A COMPANY'S FINANCIAL RISK PROFILE

The following financial considerations and ratios tend to be analyzed for the majority of industries in the corporate sector. There may be additional quantitative factors and ratios that are considered on an industry-specific basis which are noted under Section IV – Industry-Specific Factors.

Also refer to the *Corporate Sector – Glossary of Ratio Definitions* at www.dbrs.com.



(A) Earnings

DBRS's earnings analysis focuses on core or normalized earnings and in doing so considers issues such as: the sources, mix and quality of revenue; the volatility or stability of revenue; the underlying cost base (e.g., the company is a low-cost producer); optimal product pricing; and potential growth opportunities. Accordingly, earnings as presented in the financial statements are often adjusted for non-recurring items or items not considered part of ongoing operations. DBRS generally reviews company budgets and forecasts for future periods. Segmented breakdowns by division are also typically part of DBRS's analysis.

Typical earnings ratios include:

- Gross margin
- Return on common equity
- Return on capital
- EBIT margin and EBITDA margin

(B) Cash Flow/Coverage

DBRS's cash flow analysis focuses on the core cash flow generating ability of the company to service current debt obligations and other cash requirements, as well as the future direction of cash flow. From a credit analysis perspective, insufficient cash sources can create financial flexibility problems even though net income metrics may be favourable. DBRS evaluates the sustainability and quality of a company's core cash flow by focusing on cash flow from operations and free cash flow before and after working capital changes. Using core or normalized earnings as a base, DBRS adjusts cash flow from operations for as many non-recurring items as possible. In terms of outlook, DBRS focuses on the projected direction of free cash flow, the liquidity and coverage ratios and the company's ability to internally versus externally fund debt reduction and future capital expenditure and dividend/stock repurchase programs, as applicable.

Typical cash flow ratios include:

- EBIT interest coverage and EBITDA interest coverage
- EBIT fixed charges coverage
- Cash flow/total debt and cash flow/adjusted total debt
- Cash flow/capital expenditures
- Capital expenditures/depreciation
- Debt/EBITDA
- Dividend payout ratio

(C) Balance Sheet and Financial Flexibility Considerations

As part of determining the overall financial risk profile, DBRS evaluates various other factors to measure the strength and quality of the company's assets and its financial flexibility.

From a balance sheet perspective, DBRS focuses on the quality and composition of assets including goodwill and other intangibles, off-balance sheet risk, and capital strength including the quality of capital, appropriateness of leverage to asset quality, and the ability to raise new capital. DBRS also reviews the company's strategies for growth, for example, capital expenditures, plans for maintenance or expansion, and the expected source for funding these requirements. Where the numbers are considered significant and the adjustments would meaningfully impact the credit analysis, DBRS adjusts certain ratios for items such as operating leases, derivatives, securitizations, hybrid issues, off-balance sheet liabilities and various other accounting issues.

Typical balance sheet ratios include:

- Current ratio
- Turnover – Receivables and inventory
- Asset coverage (times)
- Per cent total debt to capital and per cent adjusted total debt to capital
- Per cent adjusted net debt to capital

The following factors focus on the company's liquidity:

- Maintaining sufficient bank-lines or cash balances
- Prudent use of cash balances for dividends or stock repurchases
- Terms and conditions of credit facilities including unique terms and/or financial covenants
- Debt management approach, including dependence on short-term versus long-term debt, fixed versus variable rate debt and debt maturity schedule
- Interest rate and/or foreign exchange exposure
- Relationship and strength or weakness of a parent holding company or associated companies, if applicable

IV. Industry-Specific Factors

Each industry within the corporate sector has unique features that cannot be broadly applied across all industries. For example, capital spending is a key area in the utilities industry, reserves are particular to the mining industry, adequate R&D is critical for the pharmaceutical industry and seasonality significantly impacts merchandisers. Against the backdrop of the general business and financial risk profiles, a company's unique strengths, weaknesses and industry-specific issues need to be factored into the credit analysis to form an appropriate rating. These particular business and financial issues and measures also help to shape the company's status relative to its peers.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN EVALUATING A COMPANY WITHIN THE TELECOMMUNICATION INDUSTRY

The following considerations more specifically characterize the telecommunication industry and supplement the macro business and financial considerations, respectively, in Section II and III of the DBRS methodology. All three sections, Sections II, III and IV, should be considered together.

(A) Predominant Factors

Adaptation to Changes in Technology

Telecommunication providers can both benefit from and be susceptible to the evolution of technology. The adoption and implementation of new technology, along with the competitive threat of new technologies, is assessed for telecommunication providers. While technology advances have benefited telecommunication providers in terms of allowing for the development of new services and more efficient networks, some technologies have decreased the previous "last-mile" advantage of telecommunication providers. Some of the technologies primarily responsible for this include Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), which utilizes a broadband connection, as well as wireless technology used for both voice and data services. Most telecommunication providers are evolving their networks to provide advanced communication services over an all-IP platform. The upgrade plan and progress made in executing this upgrade is assessed for each telecommunication provider.

Telecommunication Regulatory Environment

Although regulation affects every industry, telecommunication regulation can vary from country to country – even from state to state in the case of the United States. Therefore, analysis is undertaken regarding the degree of regulation to which each telecommunication provider is subject, as well as the stance of the regulator toward the telecommunication provider (general stances include support for competition or more support for the provider's investments). Key regulatory issues include competitors' access to incumbent legacy and broadband networks, local forbearance (gives an incumbent more flexibility on pricing their local services), network neutrality and how incumbents are regulated in terms of IP services.

Competitive Landscape

The competitive environment in which a telecommunication provider operates is assessed to determine the level of competitive intensity that a provider faces. Generally, this is market specific and can be highly correlated to the two aforementioned factors: technology and regulation.

(B) Other Factors

Size and scale

Size and scale can play an important role in the ratings of telecommunication providers. Generally, larger providers have the ability to spread costs over a wider customer base. Additionally, larger operators tend to have greater ability to absorb any unforeseen shocks that may occur in the operating environment. Size and scale also allows operators to appeal to larger, national or international customers.

Revenue mix

The shift in revenue mix from higher margin voice services to lower margin data or IP growth services reflects changing communications usage. The specific revenue mix of a telecommunication provider is reviewed in assessing its business risk profile. This shift is generally occurring due to substitution, technological changes and competition. Therefore, as revenues shift, telecommunication providers largely face higher business risk associated with newer revenue streams that are generally subject to more competition.

Bundling services

Also reviewed is the ability and success that a telecommunication provider has had (or is having) in bundling its services to its customers. This can illustrate the level of success a provider has or is having in terms of defending its core business and customer base. Providers are launching new services that include terrestrial video solutions, among other services, to combat the threat from cable and other service providers. This has given telecommunication providers the ability to provide triple-play (voice, data and video) and even quadruple-play communications services to their subscribers.

Networks, Marketing and Brand

Ratings analysis incorporates the functionality and the scope of the telecommunication provider's networks, including the ability to provide advanced communication services. Additionally, the contiguity of a provider's networks is considered, along with the level of density of the service area. The ability to maintain and grow a well-recognized brand and the associated accumulation of goodwill in an increasingly competitive market constitute other important considerations.

Defence of Local Voice Revenue Market Share and Access Lines

Historically, ratings of incumbent telecommunication providers have been underpinned by their solid local voice market share. As competition has evolved, there is more focus on the ability of these incumbents to defend their local market share (via bundling and marketing, for example) and attempt to mitigate access line erosion. These factors, in addition to the ability to maintain pricing discipline within the local market (especially with competitors offering competing VoIP services), are also evaluated.

Long Distance Revenue Pressure

For most telecommunication providers, long distance revenues will likely continue to come under pressure as average revenue per minute continues to fall more quickly than the increase in minutes of usage. Telecommunication providers who are more susceptible to substitution of long distance to other technologies (wireless, VoIP, etc.) may face increased pressure on their business risk profiles. This substitution impact is assessed as providers balance the transition to an environment of flat-rate plans with unlimited calling and no toll charges.

Presence in Growth Areas Such as Wireless

Wireless continues to be one of the dominant growth areas for telecommunication providers and unlike the past, many wireless franchises are generating profitability that is equivalent to fixed line voice operations. Most telecommunication providers operate a sizable wireless carrier in their respective franchise areas. Failure to own a wireless operator or lack of a dominant wireless market share can be negative factors that are weighed in determining a provider's overall business risk profile. Key criteria relating to wireless performance and support of the overall telecommunication ratings include average revenue per



user, cost of customer acquisition or retention, overall market share, and customer churn levels, all of which affect the overall profitability of wireless operations.

Penetration of Internet Services/Revenues

Consideration is given to the telecommunication provider's progression on raising their high-speed Internet subscriber numbers, including the migration of their customer base from dial-up Internet to high-speed services. Key rating factors for telecommunication providers include broadband penetration of their residential base and the ability to keep average revenues per customer growing through the offering of additional services. This tends to be a highly competitive area with cable operators competing effectively in this market.

Exposure to Business Data and Internet Services

The business data and Internet service segment is one of the most challenging areas for telecommunication providers, since competition has existed for many years from competitive local exchange companies (CLECS) and other incumbents operating outside of their territory, as well as certain service aggregators. The level of exposure and profitability of a provider's business data operation is considered in the evaluation of its business risk profile. Although this area has the promise of revenue growth, prices have tended to face pressure in the past due to oversupply conditions and the commodity-like characteristics of the offerings.

Video Service Deployment

Video is currently seen as a defensive measure that telecommunication providers are implementing to counter the threat from other cable companies and VoIP providers. Video service can be provided by a telecommunications provider through satellite (owned or through marketing agreements) as well as terrestrially. The status and future plans of a telecommunication provider's video deployment is analyzed in assessing its business risk profile. The lack of a video strategy could be viewed negatively, especially for incumbent telecommunication providers that face strong cable or satellite competition.

Ability to Manage Costs

Given the evolving revenue mix and technological changes, the ability to maintain or grow cash flow from operations is also highly correlated to the telecommunication provider's ability to reduce its cost base. This is done in primarily two ways: (i) the migration to an all-IP network for data, in addition to maintaining the circuit switched network; and (ii) implementing operating cost reduction initiatives through headcount rightsizing, contract work flexibility and premise consolidation. In addition, the cash costs of implementing these programs, along with their paybacks, are considered. Telecommunication providers that face challenges in addressing their cost bases due to a highly unionized workforce or government interference could have less control over adapting to a competitive environment.

Pensions and Other Employee Benefits

In countries where the government does not provide pension benefits, the pension deficiency (or surplus) of the telecommunication provider is a rating consideration. Additionally, the costs of other post-retirement benefits, such as medical plans, are considered.

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