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On the Applicability of WACC for Investment Decisions

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Sobre la aplicabilidad del WACC para decisiones de inversión
Sobre a aplicabilidade do WACC para decisões de investimento

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Although WACC is appropriate for project and firm valuation, it is not a good rule for investment decision making. The reason is that by mixing up the value of the project itself with the tax shield, WACC can often turn unattractive projects into apparently acceptable ones. Real investments must be accepted only if they yield positive NPVs when discounted at the unleveraged discount rate, that is, without accounting for the tax shield. WACC enters the picture only to assess the impact of a new project on firm value, once it has been accepted, and when a fixed debt ratio policy is in place.

Aunque el WACC es adecuado para la valoración del proyecto y de la firma, no es una buena regla para tomar decisiones de inversión. Al mezclar el valor del propio proyecto con los incentivos fiscales, el WACC suele disfrazar proyectos nada atractivos como proyectos aparentemente aceptables. Se deben aceptar inversiones reales únicamente si arrojan cifras positivas de Valor Actual Líquido cuando se sustraen a la tasa aplicada de descuento, es decir, sin tener en cuenta los incentivos fiscales. WACC entra en acción solamente para evaluar el efecto de un nuevo proyecto en el valor de la firma, una vez aceptado y cuando hay efectiva una política de índice de endeudamiento fija.

Embora o WACC seja apropriado para avaliação de projectos e de firmas, não é uma boa regra para a tomada de decisão de investimento. A razão é que, ao misturar o valor do próprio projecto com os incentivos fiscais, o WACC pode muitas vezes transformar projectos não atractivos em projectos aparentemente aceitáveis. Os investimentos reais só devem ser aceites se apresentarem Valor Actual Líquido positivo quando descontados à taxa de desconto não alavancada, ou seja, sem contar com os incentivos fiscais. O WACC só entra em cena para avaliar o impacto de um novo projecto no valor da firma, uma vez este aceite, e quando é aplicada uma política de taxa de endividamento fixa.

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1. Introduction

According to Miller & Modigliani (1958, 1963), hereinafter MM, the cost of capital WACC of a firm after corporate taxes (but before personal taxes) is given by the formula:¹

$$WACC = \frac{D}{V} \cdot (1 - T_c) \cdot r_D + \frac{E}{V} \cdot r_E \quad (1)$$

The following relationship also holds:

$$WACC = \left(1 - \frac{DT_c}{V}\right) \cdot r_0 \quad (2)$$

Where,

r_0 is the asset discount rate after taxes

D is the market value of debt

T_c is the corporate tax rate

V is the market value of the firm

r_D is the cost of debt

E is the market value of equity

r_E is the cost of equity

If the terms are reordered, the following expression is found for the return on equity with taxes:

$$r_E = r_0 + \frac{D}{E} \cdot [(r_0 - r_D) \cdot (1 - T_c)] \quad (3)$$

There is also the following equivalent formula:

$$V = V_u + DT_c \quad (4)$$

Where V_u is the value of the unleveraged firm after taxes.

This last formula shows that the value of the firm rises with debt by an amount equal to DT_c . This amount is known as the tax shield.

The above results are based on the following assumptions:

- *No transaction costs*

This assumption ensures that everyone has the same access to financial markets.

For example, with transaction costs the possibility of adjusting personal portfolios to compensate for the firms' financing decisions would be costly, and might not be valid. Therefore, leverage would not be irrelevant when computing firm value.

KEY WORDS

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PALABRAS CLAVE

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PALAVRAS- CHAVE

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- *Perfectly competitive financial markets*

With this condition nobody has advantages in the financial markets. If this were not the case, leverage preferences could differ among market participants and debt levels would not be irrelevant.

- *No agency costs*

This implies that the manager's sole objective is to maximize shareholders' wealth. Therefore, the financial mix does not have any relation with the particular interests of administrators nor any impact on firm value.

- *No personal taxes*

Individuals do not pay taxes².

- *All cash flows are no-growth perpetuities*

This assumption merely helps to simplify the formulas for the cost of capital and the value of the firm.

MM's work gave rise to two equivalent approaches for firm and project valuation³. The value of a firm or a project can be computed either by discounting asset cash flows after taxes at WACC, or by discounting asset cash flows after taxes at the unleveraged discount rate r_0 and adding the PV of the tax shield. The latter approach is known as Adjusted Present Value (APV)⁴.

In the following, it will be shown that although discounting at WACC is appropriate for project and firm valuation, it is not a good rule for investment decision making. For the sake of simplicity the argument will be illustrated with a practical example.

2. WACC and Project Valuation

Assume that a firm is started with a project yielding a \$1 million yearly perpetual cash flow after taxes⁵. The project requires an initial investment of \$100 million and will be fully financed with equity. The project demands 12% annual return after taxes⁶.

2. Miller (1977) shows how MM's results are modified in the presence of personal taxes.

3. Ruback (2002) proposes a third equivalent method: Capital Cash Flows.

4. APV has been generalized to include other effects on value besides the tax shield. For further information refer to Ross, Westerfield & Jaffe (1999).

5. In reality cash flows are not certain but expected.

6. The discount rate can be determined by the CAPM or any other asset pricing model such as the APT.

The project's present value PV is:

$$PV = \frac{10MM}{0.12} = +\$83.34MM \quad (5)$$

The NPV will be:

$$NPV = +\$83.34MM - 100MM = -\$16.67MM \quad (6)$$

Thus, the project must be rejected⁷.

In the event of the project being undertaken the financial balance sheets of the firm would look like this:

Assets	Liabilities
Project: +\$83.34MM	Equity: +\$83.34MM

Investors would have put up \$100 million in exchange for equity worth just \$83.34 million. A bad decision, clearly. The present value rule has guided us wisely.

But, what is behind the present value rule?

Its key assumption is that all investors have equal access to financial markets and that these markets are complete and efficient. In our example, this implies that the investor always has the choice of placing the \$100 million in a comparable portfolio of financial assets.

In an efficient financial market the return on this portfolio must be equivalent to a \$12 million annual perpetuity and the NPV of the financial investment would be zero. Hence, the investor will never undertake a negative NPV project if he has the choice of investing in a zero NPV portfolio. This is why the present value rule dictates that only positive NPV projects must be accepted.

Let us now see what happens when the same firm decides to take leverage to finance the project.

- Enter leverage

In general, the financial balance sheet of a leveraged firm⁹ is given by:

Assets	Liabilities
Investments	Debt
Tax shield (DTC)	Equity
Total value	Total value

7. Throughout the paper it is assumed that management maximizes firm value (i.e. there are no agency problems) and that there are no costs of financial distress.

8. Meaning a balance sheet in market value terms.

9. Assuming all cash flows are no-growth perpetuities.

Now imagine that our firm has a 50% corporate tax rate and decides to partially finance the project with \$50 million of debt at a 4% annual interest. Notice that it is understood that the borrowing and investment decisions are independent.

If the project is accepted the financial balance sheet of the firm will be:

Assets	Liabilities
Project: +\$83.34MM	Debt: \$50MM
Tax shield: +\$50MMx0.5 = \$25MM	Equity: \$58.34MM
Total value: \$108.34MM	Total value: \$108.34MM

- Using MM's formulas:

The value of WACC is:

$$WACC = r_0 \cdot \left(1 - \frac{DT_c}{V}\right) = 0.12 \cdot \left(1 - \frac{\$50MM \cdot 0.5}{\$108.34MM}\right) = 9.23\% \quad (7)$$

And the value of r_E is:

$$r_E = r_0 + \frac{D}{E} \cdot [(r_0 - r_D) \cdot (1 - T_c)] = 0.12 + \frac{\$50MM}{\$58.34MM} \cdot [(0.12 - 0.04) \cdot (1 - 0.5)] = 15.43\% \quad (8)$$

Discounting at WACC, the PV of the project will now be:

$$PV = \frac{\$10MM}{0.0923} = \$108.34MM \quad (9)$$

And its NPV:

$$NPV = \$108.34MM - \$100MM = +\$8.34MM \quad (10)$$

So, it seems that the use of leverage has turned an unattractive project into an acceptable one.

3. Why WACC is not Appropriate for Investment Decision Making

The difference in PVs between the unleveraged and the leveraged project is:

$$108.34 - 83.34 = \$25MM \quad (11)$$

This amounts exactly to the tax shield. The result can be more clearly appreciated if APV is

used instead. The APV of the leveraged project equals the PV of the unleveraged project plus the PV of the tax shield:

$$APV = E(PV_{unleveraged}) + DT_C \quad (12)$$

In our example:

$$APV = 83.34 + 50 \cdot 0.5 = \$108.34MM \quad (13)$$

But, is it correct to accept a negative (unleveraged) NPV project just because of the tax shield it generates?

I think the answer is no, in general. If all investors have equal access to complete and efficient financial markets it will still be possible to invest \$100 million in an equivalent portfolio of financial assets. This portfolio will be equivalent to a \$12 million annual perpetuity after taxes. And since, like the real project, it will be partially financed by \$50 million of debt, the investor will conserve the benefit of the tax shield.

Let us recalculate the financial balance sheet in the event of the project being rejected and the \$100 million being invested instead in the equivalent financial portfolio:

Assets	Liabilities
Financial portfolio: +\$100MM	Debt: \$50MM
Tax shield: +\$50MMx0.5 = \$25MM	Equity: \$75MM
Total value: \$125MM	Total value: \$125MM

The new WACC will be:

$$WACC = 0.12 \cdot \left(1 - \frac{\$25MM}{\$125MM}\right) = 9.6\% \quad (14)$$

The new PV will be:

$$PV = \frac{12}{0.096} = \$125MM \quad (15)$$

Or, using APV:

$$APV = 100 + 25 = \$125MM \quad (16)$$

A result that is clearly superior to the \$108.34 million obtained by investing in the project.

Therefore, the rule must be that whenever,

- a) All investors have equal access to complete and efficient financial markets and,
- b) Investment and borrowing decisions are independent of each other.

Then, a real investment must be accepted only if it yields a positive NPV when discounted at the unleveraged discount rate. Discounting at WACC might lead to unfavorable decisions¹⁰.

4. What Happens When the Assumptions do not Hold

Unleveraged negative NPV projects might be acceptable only when these assumptions do not hold. First, if an investor faces restrictions to access financial markets and/or financial markets are not complete or efficient, a financial portfolio equivalent to the project might not be attainable. In this instance, investing in an unleveraged negative NPV project might be justified as long as the benefit stemming from the expanded investment opportunity set is large enough.

Second, if the investment and borrowing decisions are closely tied, then the tax shield might not be possible without the project. Here again an unleveraged negative NPV project might be acceptable.

Nonetheless, we should be aware that the lack of validity of the assumptions does not justify the use of WACC for investment decision making. WACC remains an unsafe rule for the simple reason that it mixes up the value of the project itself with the tax shield, not allowing the valuation of projects on their own merits. In no case must an unleveraged negative NPV project be accepted.

As long as the investment and borrowing decisions are independent, it is always preferable to evaluate each investment opportunity on its own merits, meaning that the project's cash flows must be discounted at the unleveraged discount rate. Only then, its PV must be adjusted for the possible effects of contingent debt and/or the benefits of an expanded investment opportunity set. Notice that this is no different from the APV approach.

- *The role of WACC*

Up to this point it has been assumed that the borrowing and investment decisions are independent. However, many firms have a constant debt ratio policy¹¹. When this is the case, every time a project is accepted the amount of debt must be adjusted to keep it in line with the value of the new assets that have been incorporated into the balance sheet.

It can be shown that it is quite cumbersome to use APV to allow for this tuning, whereas WACC takes account of it automatically¹² and thus is a more practical approach for quantifying the impact of the debt adjustment.

¹⁰. The conclusion is not altered when personal taxes are considered. The only difference is that the WACC tax rate and the tax shield are combined expressions including both the corporate and the personal tax rates.

¹¹. This is true mostly in industrialized economies. In developing countries debt policy tends to be opportunistic. For further information refer to Sabal (2002).

¹². Refer to Inselbag & Kaufold (1997) on this point.

Nevertheless, this does not alter our earlier conclusion that projects must be accepted or rejected on the basis of their NPV by discounting their after tax cash flows at the unlevered discount rate. The conclusion still holds. WACC enters the picture only to assess the impact of a new project on firm value, once it has been accepted, and when a fixed debt ratio policy is in place.

5. Conclusions

MM's work gave rise to two equivalent methods for firm and project valuation. The value of a firm or a project can be computed either by discounting asset cash flows after taxes at WACC, or by discounting asset cash flows after taxes at the unleveraged discount rate and adding the PV of the tax shield (i.e. the APV approach).

In this paper it has been shown that although discounting at WACC is appropriate for project and firm valuation, it is not a good rule for investment decision making. The reason is that by mixing up the value of the project itself with the tax shield, WACC can often turn unattractive projects into apparently acceptable ones. Real investments must be accepted only if they yield positive NPVs when discounted at the unleveraged discount rate, that is, without accounting for the tax shield.

Unleveraged negative NPV projects might be acceptable only when the investment and borrowing decisions are somehow related, the investor faces restrictions to access the financial markets, or financial markets are not complete or efficient.

WACC enters the picture only to assess the impact of a new project on firm value, once it has been accepted, and when a fixed debt ratio policy is in place.

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