



Defining goodwill: a practice perspective

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Defining
goodwill

161

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify a definition of goodwill related to how companies describe their purchased goodwill. It focuses on whether there is any consistency in how firms define goodwill in practice in the first year of mandatory application of International Financial Reporting Standards 3 (IFRS3).

Design/methodology/approach – The paper builds on an analysis of how companies describe goodwill in purchase analyses related to company acquisitions. The empirical body of this study is represented by the financial statements of Italian and Swedish listed companies.

Findings – The overall finding of this investigation is that, in practice, the concept of goodwill is unclear and therefore there is no reference to one singular definition of goodwill. Moreover, in spite of the idea underlying IFRS3, goodwill still appears to be a “black box”, wherefore an accounting inertia is highlighted.

Research limitations/implications – The main limitation of this study is that only a sample of firms (those listed on the Stockholm Stock Exchange and the Milan Stock Exchange) that apply IFRS3 is investigated. The main implication of this paper is that it is possible to identify some general classes of descriptions, but these remain vague. Therefore, some accounting policy suggestions are proposed.

Originality/value – First, this paper focuses on a definition communicated by firms, which is different from most other studies, as they tend to focus on a theoretical definition of goodwill. Second, this paper focuses on a goodwill definition in practice, whereas studies of goodwill practice mainly concern impairment testing.

Keywords Goodwill, International Financial Reporting Standards, Financial accounting, Intangible assets, Business combination, Accounting standards, International standards

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Accounting for goodwill constitutes ongoing challenges to accounting practitioners (Powell, 2003). During the last century, there has been a gradual shift from non-recognition of goodwill on the balance sheet towards its inclusion, now even without having to be amortised. In this setting, several theoretical attempts have been made to define goodwill (Bloom, 2009; Colley and Volkan, 1988; Johnson and Petrone, 1998) but, in spite of this, the concept is still vague (Colley and Volkan, 1988; Henning, 2000) due to the lack of an empirical dimension (Cooper, 2007; Courtis, 1983). Therefore it can be considered as a sort of “black box” (Power, 2001), i.e. what goodwill actually is remains unclear.

Goodwill as a “black box” makes a description of goodwill’s a particular issue in order to understand it. One reason for this is that after a theoretical definition of what goodwill is and instructions on how to account for it, interpretive action can be found (Hines, 1988; Thompson, 1990). Following this production of accounting information,



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Table of Contents Goodwill In Practice

1. Understanding the eBook Goodwill In Practice
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Goodwill In Practice
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Goodwill In Practice
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Goodwill In Practice
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Goodwill In Practice
 - Personalized Recommendations

- Goodwill In Practice User Reviews and Ratings
- Goodwill In Practice and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing Goodwill In Practice Free and Paid eBooks
 - Goodwill In Practice Public Domain eBooks
 - Goodwill In Practice eBook Subscription Services
 - Goodwill In Practice Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Goodwill In Practice eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Goodwill In Practice Compatibility with Devices
 - Goodwill In Practice Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Goodwill In Practice
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Goodwill In Practice
 - Interactive Elements Goodwill In Practice
- 8. Staying Engaged with Goodwill In Practice
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Goodwill In Practice
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Goodwill In Practice
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Goodwill In Practice
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Goodwill In Practice
 - Setting Reading Goals Goodwill In Practice
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Goodwill In Practice
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Goodwill In Practice

- Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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