



DATA - A NEW EMERGING TYPE OF INTANGIBLE

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As the digital economy transforms how businesses create value, data has emerged as a powerful yet largely invisible corporate resource. Few businesses are absent from this shift, with some harnessing vast troves of, for example, customer behaviour data for commercial gain—yet this value often does not appear on balance sheets. Internally generated data resources (DATA) have become critical drivers of corporate performance, but traditional accounting frameworks, rooted in physical and clearly definable assets, struggle to recognise their worth. This disconnect raises fundamental questions about the relevance and completeness of current financial reporting in a digital age.

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It explores whether and how DATA can yield economic benefits, and whether its omission from financial statements hinders decision-making for users of those reports. It examines the tension between measurement reliability and value relevance, proposing two divergent pathways: enhanced disclosure or enhanced recognition. As debates intensify around the role of accounting in reflecting digital value creation, the paper critically evaluates the limitations of existing standards—particularly IAS 38—and outlines potential reforms to ensure financial reporting evolves in step with the intangible, data-driven future of business.

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SYNOPSIS AND INSIGHTS FOR PRACTICE

“On 10 December 2023, The Times published an article about the treasure trove of customer data gathered by Tesco and Sainsbury’s through their respective Clubcard and Nectar schemes.

Such data reflects customer preferences and behaviours and is a valuable asset that can be sold to brands for targeted online advertising. It is an example of the burgeoning value-creation model driven by internally generated data resources, which has significantly influenced corporations with data-driven business models.

This surge in value creation is met with a lag in the corresponding accounting treatment, presenting challenges due to complexities in mechanisms for data to yield economic benefits, ownership rights and measurement reliability of data. ”

The above example highlights how the digital economy plays an increasingly important role in socio-economic development. A specific category of corporate intangibles , DATA resources (hereafter, we use “DATA” to denote these specific intangibles) can play an important role in generating corporate value - this type of intangible can be a critical driver of corporate performance and a significant contributor to corporate value. It is not disclosed, however, as an individual accounting line item in any of the main financial statements, in particular for internally generated corporate DATA.

Traditionally, accounting for intangibles predominantly considers how to recognise expenditures on advertising, patents, copyrights, research and development, customer relations, marketing, brand and reputation, and human capital, etc. The issues involved tend to revolve around three separate concerns.

First, should expenditures on these activities be expensed or capitalised (with subsequent amortisation and/or impairment)?

Second, should there be separate line-item disclosure for these expenditures? As an example, advertising expenditures (for example, those aimed at building long-term brand value and, hence, at improving cash flows in the long-term) are typically expensed and are not separately disclosed. Similarly, expenditures on the development of human capital (for example, expenditures on the development of relevant skills in the work force and, hence, aimed at improving cash flows in the long-term) are typically expensed and not disclosed. Research (as opposed to development) expenditures are typically expensed but are subject to line-item disclosure.

Third, can more general business model disclosures be effective in providing sufficient incremental information relevant to the needs of users of financial statements?

Value creation models driven by DATA are on the increase, and corporations with data-driven business models are playing more important roles in the economy. Various surveys and research suggest the escalating interest of primary users of financial reports in obtaining information and insights into the value of corporate intangibles (Srivastava 2014; Hoogervorst 2017; FRC 2021). The current accounting treatment of DATA is facing questions as developments in digital economies occur. Nonetheless, due to the complexity of the mechanisms yielding economic benefits, and ownership (control rights), and the challenges in reliably measuring their value, it is challenging to recognise internally generated intangibles, including DATA, as assets in financial statements.

To strike a balance between the accounting principles of *value relevance* and *measurement reliability* (also referred to as *faithful representation*) with respect to the accounting treatment of intangibles, one group of views advocates the principle of “Enhanced Disclosure” to address these challenges (FRC 2021; AASB 2022). The argument posits that the inherent uncertainty of their ownership rights, the uncertainty of their measurement reliability, and the uncertainty of their economic value creation process render their accounting recognition as assets unfeasible under current standards. For instance, Wyatt (2008), in her literature review, concludes that in general, R&D is not reliably measured, while financial and non-financial disclosures on R&D are value relevant. She proposes that, for the accounting treatment of corporate intangibles, it is realistic to provide more disclosure, such as using a narrative report, rather than to recognise them as intangible assets in the financial statements. Primary users of the financial reports can leverage relevant disclosure to better value the entity.

The International Accounting Standards Board (IASB), in its Practice Statement Management Commentary (IASB 2021), also recommends that management teams disclose their business models, value creation strategies, and significant economic resources in the management commentary section to enhance the value relevance of financial reporting.

Another group of views supports applying the “Enhanced Recognition” principle to address these challenges. Current International Accounting Standards (IAS) 38 Intangible Assets prohibits capitalising internally generated R&D expenditure in the research phase and only allows capitalisation of development costs when certain criteria are met. Since it usually takes a lengthy period to achieve breakthroughs in frontier technologies, the current IAS 38 results in a significant mismatch between R&D related revenue and expenses (Barker and Penman 2020; Barker, Lennard, Penman and Teixeira 2022; Lev 2018; Lev 2019). It is then argued that the relevance and usefulness of accounting information are consistently decreasing with the passage of time, particularly among high-tech companies (Lev and Gu 2016; Xie and Zhang 2023).

This perspective proposes amendments to existing accounting standards, primarily IAS 38, to allow more internally generated intangibles to be recognised on the financial statements. Advocates for the enhanced recognition approach further posit that, in the context of the rapid global development of the digital economy, intangibles (such as DATA) have become key production factors for some corporations, essential bases for their business decision-making process, and crucial constituents of their corporate value.

Accounting practices should then respond more proactively to these challenges and, by recognising more internally generated assets, including DATA, in the financial statements, reporting entities can strengthen the objective of financial statements to reflect the corporation's economic nature and, more importantly, enhance the value relevance of financial reports. The basis of these views – that the value relevance of accounting information has been declining – does not go unchallenged, however. As opponents of revising IAS 38, Barth et al. (2023) argue, and provide evidence, that the value relevance of accounting information is not declining in the new economy.

We posit that if financial reporting is to have as high a level of decision usefulness as possible in the context of the rapid evolution of the digital economy, it is important to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the accounting treatment of corporate DATA, both current and potential. In this paper, we do so by addressing the following key research questions.

- Whether and how DATA resources can yield economic benefits for reporting entities?

- Why and if information concerning corporate DATA resources is necessary/material for primary users of financial reports?
- How do reporting entities currently present and disclose relevant information on DATA resources in their financial reports?
- In balancing the relevance and reliability criteria, should reporting entities recognise internally generated DATA resources as intangible assets or, instead, provide more comprehensive disclosure?
- What challenges do accounting standards confront in better reflecting the economic essence of these intangibles, and what prospective amendments could be considered for accounting standards in the future?

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows.

- **Section 2** discusses related literature;
- **Section 3** analyses the current accounting treatment of corporate DATA and the challenges faced by current accounting standards, considering the unique nature of data assets, and develops our key research questions;
- **Section 4** provides a framework for the accounting treatment of DATA, including classification, recognition, measurement, presentation, and disclosure of DATA;
- **Section 5** discusses challenges to changing accounting for DATA, understood broadly; and
- **Section 6** concludes the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned above, some academic research in accounting argues that the value relevance of traditional accounting information in the new economy is gradually deteriorating. The correlation between stock prices (returns) and critical financial information (such as earnings, asset, and cash flow information) is declining, indicating that the explanatory power of key elements of financial statements for corporate value is gradually deteriorating (Beyer et al. 2010; Srivastava 2014; Lev and Gu 2016).

Beyer et al. (2010) find that numerical (quantitative) information on financial statements explains only 28% of quarterly stock return variability. Srivastava (2014) shows that due to the increase in the proportion of intangible assets of newly listed companies, the ability of earnings information to predict future performance is declining. Lev and Gu (2016) find that as expenditures on intangible assets increased yearly, the correlation between the corporate market value and accounting book values continued to decrease. If the value of financial statements is solely captured by aggregate line items such as earnings or book value, this line of research suggests a decline in the value relevance of accounting information. Barth et al. (2023), however, consider more accounting line items, notably items related to intangible assets, growth opportunities, and alternative performance measures, and find no decline in the combined value relevance of accounting items. They argue that their findings reveal an evolution to a more nuanced, but not declining, relationship between accounting information and share prices.

More recently, in 2018, the UK's Financial Reporting Council (FRC) initiated a research consultation to review current requirements on reporting of intangibles and to develop proposals for their improvement. In 2019, FRC issued the Discussion Paper 'Business Reporting of Intangibles' to gather stakeholder views and provide inputs to IASB's future work agenda (FRC 2019). According to the Feedback Statement, respondents reached an agreement that the importance of financial reporting on intangibles was increasing in the knowledge-based economy (FRC 2021, para. 4). Stakeholders' perspectives, however, were divided on whether the existing accounting standards for intangibles should be revised, and how.

Some respondents argued that the current IAS 38 works well in presenting useful financial information, thus there is no need for a fundamental revision. As an alternative, they suggested that standard-setters should focus on improvements to narrative disclosures on intangibles and R&D activities. Opponents of valuing intangible assets at fair value argue that this may induce opportunistic earnings management and bring price bubbles into financial statements, both of which reduce the reliability of accounting information (Penman 2007; Skinner 2008).

In contrast, there are stakeholders favouring revisiting current definition and recognition criteria of intangible assets (FRC 2021, para. 15). Some literature argues that the decline in the value relevance of key elements of financial reports, such as earnings or book value, is due to lack of recognition of some important intangibles generated within the corporation as assets (Lev 2018, 2019; Hoogervorst 2017), as financial reporting does not fully recognise important economic resources which are vital to the entity's value-creation process.

There are two groups of research studies conducted to improve the value relevance of financial reporting on users' decision-making processes. One group of such studies focuses on improving the general presentation of financial statements - they try to boost the amendments to accounting standards, especially the revision of the "Asset" concept in the balance sheet. For example, they argue that in the context of the rapid development of the digital economy and the rapid

accumulation of data within the entity, it becomes an urgent theoretical and practical issue to study whether and how to recognise DATA in the financial statements.

In contrast, the second group of studies focuses on improving information disclosure in financial reports. IASB and US SEC require companies to disclose more information about value-driving economic resources, business models, business relationships, and potential risks (IASB 2021; SEC 2003). A relevant report, “Better Information Disclosure on Intangible Assets” (EFRAG 2021), shows that significant information asymmetry concerning specific types of intangibles between financial report preparers and users may affect the market value of the entity, resulting in inefficient allocation of capital and making it difficult for management to perform fiduciary duties.

Improving accounting treatment for intangibles is on the agenda of IASB’s work plans between 2022 and 2026. In 2022, after IASB completed its third agenda consultation, the revision of IAS 38 is considered one of the most important research projects in the next five years. Attention to intangible asset accounting issues from standard setters is increasing. Various standard-setting bodies and research institutions are also strengthening their research on issues related to intangibles and they have put forward some preliminary proposals for future discussion. The European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG), the Australia Accounting Standard Board (AASB), the Korean Accounting Standard Board (KASB), FRC (Financial Reporting Council), and the UK Endorsement Board (UKEB) are undertaking research projects on this topic to contribute to the debate.

Some research proposes to improve the disclosure of the specific intangible assets generated within the corporation. KASB (2019), FRC (2019), EFRAG (2021), and AASB (2022) have carried out some pioneering explorations in this regard. KASB (2019) recommends that, to provide better disclosures about intangibles which are the main drivers of a corporation’s value, the reporting entity could provide a separate description of “core intangible assets” in the notes to the financial statements.

The FRC (2019) discusses why intangible assets cannot be reflected well in financial statements alone. It argues that the measurement of internally generated intangible assets using fair value models may increase noise in the financial statements, as well as audit risk. The UK FRC recommends that reporting entities provide information on expenditures not recognised as intangible assets. The FRC also recommends disclosing the contribution of intangibles to corporate activities and value outside financial reports, such as via narrative reporting. EFRAG argued in its discussion paper, *Intangible Resources Reporting Literature Review (2020)* that “there is substantial evidence that the macroeconomic phenomenon of intangible asset investment has become quite prominent, marking the arrival of a new phase of “capitalism without capital”, that a corporate’s market value tends to be increasingly driven by the intangible assets it generates rather than tangible assets, the value relevance of financial statements is expected to be improved if more granular information about intangible assets are provided.”

In the EFRAG discussion paper, *Better Information on Intangible Assets (2021)*, EFRAG proposes dividing intangible assets into three categories:

- intangible assets controlled by the reporting entity with relatively clear ownership and can be bought and sold, including marketing-related intangible assets and technology-based intangible assets;
- intangible assets controlled by a reporting entity, but their well-defined and legally protected ownership may not exist, and the trading market in which the asset locates is imperfect or non-existent; and

- intangible assets with little control from the entity and no trading market, including intangible assets related to specific personnel and intangible assets related to customer relationships. Different options for recognising internally generated intangible assets are also evaluated in this report.

The Australian Accounting Standards Board's *Intangible Assets: Reducing Financial Statement Information Gaps through Improved Disclosure* (2022) focuses on improving the disclosure concerning various unrecognised internally generated intangibles critical to achieving corporate strategic objectives. It emphasises that the objective of the disclosure is to provide principal users of financial statements with information to evaluate the current and expected financial impact of material intangibles on management's fiduciary responsibilities. Possible ways of disclosures are also discussed in this discussion paper.

On August 21, 2023, China's Ministry of Finance (MOF) issued *the Interim Provisions on Accounting Treatment of Enterprise Data Resources*, which tentatively allows Chinese firms to follow IAS 2 (Inventory) and IAS 38 (intangibles) to recognise and disclose corporate DATA resources in their financial statements from the year 2024.

In conclusion, in the context of the digital economy, presenting DATA in financial statements and the provision of improved information disclosure might help financial report users better understand the corporate value creation model and assess corporate value. Whether the accounting treatment of corporate DATA in financial statements should be based on the principle of enhanced disclosure or enhanced recognition, however, is still open to debate. There will be ongoing debates over the "measurement reliability" and "value relevance" of intangibles, and research in this field needs to be accelerated.

CHALLENGES IN THE ACCOUNTING TREATMENT OF DATA AND RESEARCH QUESTION DEVELOPMENT

Challenges to accounting treatments of DATA resources

To analyse the complexities involved in the related accounting treatments, our research starts from an accounting perspective, looking at potential issues from the accounting concepts outlined in the IFRS conceptual framework (2018). We start from IFRS Conceptual Framework (2018), in which the definition of “Asset” includes the following conditions.

- “An asset is a present economic resource controlled by the entity as a result of past events.”
- “An economic resource is a right that has the potential to produce economic benefits.”
- “An entity controls an economic resource if it has the present ability to direct the use of the economic resource and obtain the economic benefits that may flow from it.”
- “Intangible assets refer to identifiable nonmonetary assets without physical form owned or controlled by an entity.”

Hence, for corporate resources to be recognised on the reporting entity’s balance sheet, they should be “resources formed by past transactions or events of a corporation, owned or controlled by an entity, and expected to bring economic benefits to the entity”. The IASB further defines the nonphysical resources of an entity outside the scope of recognition of existing intangible assets as “specific intangible assets”. Since corporate DATA are nonmonetary and lack physical form, if they were to meet the asset definition and be recognised in the financial statements, it is reasonable to categorise them as specific intangible assets.

Under the accounting definition of assets, for intangibles to be recognised as assets, they must fulfil specific conditions:

- the economic benefits related to the intangibles are likely to flow into the entity in the future;
- the reporting entity must possess controlling rights over the intangibles; and
- the value (costs) of the intangibles must be reliably measurable.

Only when intangibles meet these principles of identifiability, controllability, and measurability simultaneously can they be recognised as intangible assets on the balance sheet.

Corporate DATA present distinctive characteristics when compared with other intangibles. Their unique characteristics manifest primarily in three areas:

- the complexity of the mechanisms via which they create economic value;
- the complexity of their legal ownership (especially ownership rights); and
- the complexity of their value measurement (especially the reliability of valuation models).
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The next section discusses and provides insights into these challenges.

How can corporate DATA create economic benefits for reporting entities?

Regarding this first challenge, under the IASB’s “Conceptual Framework for Financial Reporting” (2018), IASB no longer requires “a high probability” of obtaining potential economic benefits for asset recognition, which used to be an important reason why some intangibles have not been capitalised (eg, research and development expenditures incurred with the ultimate intent of generating new and profitable products).

We assert that, in the context of the development of the digital economy, corporations can derive potential economic benefits from DATA through two broad value creation models: “industrial digitisation” and “digital industrialisation”. In the context of “industrial digitisation”, traditional industries leverage digital elements, such as data and digital technologies, to enhance future economic benefits and improve competitiveness - a model referred to as a “Data Enhanced Model.” Under this model, the inflow of economic benefits from data is primarily manifested in utilising data resources, in conjunction with other resources, to enhance operational efficiency, support product production, optimise operational or management activities, increase revenue, reduce costs, strengthen relationships with stakeholders, and improve the quality of existing products, among other aspects. The following examples illustrate potential mechanisms for corporations to attain economic benefits through “industrial digitisation.”

Mechanism 1: Improve operating efficiency and productivity

Data-driven decision-making processes can enhance operating efficiency by providing real-time, more accurate, and detailed information on operational processes. This approach assists corporations in optimising cost structures or increasing productivity through informed decision-making.

Illustrative Example 1: During the routine operation of a power grid for many years, corporation A accumulates and forms a database of corporate users’ electricity consumption and creates a data analysis tool of electricity consumption, which can produce more accurate forecasts of future electricity consumption trends through the historical analysis of electricity consumption in different seasons, different periods, different geographical areas and other dimensions. The database and analysis tool can be used for its operations and management activities, such as setting up new power facilities and scheduling power distribution networks more reasonably, which is conducive to improving the operation efficiency of corporation A.

Illustrative Example 2: During the past production of a chemical product, chemical corporation B has accumulated data about raw material inputs, the chemical reaction process and the product refining process under a specific production process and has further processed the data to create a data model which can be used to optimise its production and increase production efficiency significantly.

Mechanism 2: Better understand customers’ needs

Analysing customer-related data enables corporations to uncover hidden patterns, trends, and correlations, facilitating a better understanding of customer needs. This data-driven model helps corporations adjust to market trends, develop new products and services, and gain a competitive edge in product or service innovations.

Illustrative Example 3: E-commerce corporation C collects and analyses users’ application (APP) browsing behaviour (after informing users and obtaining users’ authorisation). In combination with the external purchase of auxiliary data such as consumption levels and trends in some regions, it integrates and forms an intelligent recommendation algorithm tool, which is used to personalise product recommendations in line with the corporation’s interests and users’ preferences, and data, together with the algorithm tools, significantly improves the level of refinement and personalisation of the recommendations. As a result, it significantly increases corporate sales volume.

Note that some corporations have always done these general activities. For example, firms have hired consultants to help them improve their operating activities and/or market research companies

to help them improve their customer offerings or had in-house activities to help them in these areas. The current situation can be distinguished from the past, however, by the potential extent, and timescale, of impact of such activities and the extent to which they use the systematic and continuous collection and analysis of data.

Turning to “digital industrialisation,” which pertains to new-economy industries, corporations base their strategies on data and new digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and big data algorithms. For corporations operating under “digital industrialisation,” the value creation processes of data become a core element of their business strategy and an essential constituent of their business model—a model referred to as a “Data Enabled Model.” The following examples illustrate potential mechanisms for corporations to derive economic benefits through “digital industrialisation.”

Mechanism 3: Data as a value-added service/product

Corporations utilise DATA to provide unique services to other entities. In this case, data becomes an indispensable resource to their business model and can contribute additional sources of income to corporations.

Illustrative Example 4: Credit rating corporation D generates its core product, a credit rating (score), based on data collected from various online channels and combined with proprietary data algorithms developed by the corporation. Their corporate strategic value depends entirely on the data they collect and the continuous updating of related algorithms.

Illustrative Example 5: Corporation E mainly engages in APP marketing push services. Due to the industry's high real-time requirements for online user data, Corporation E analyses online data and uses them to provide marketing services based on customers' online behaviours, preferences for similar products and other factors.

Illustrative Example 6: Corporation F is engaged in data services in commodity trading. Based on the data collected and compiled by itself and purchased externally, they undertake necessary procedures to increase the data quality, such as data cleaning, data labelling, integration and analysis; after that, corporation F creates a database to provide external query services. Other commodity trading corporates could subscribe to the database and use historical transaction data and market supply and demand data as the reference benchmark for transactions and their settlement basis. Industry regulatory associations can also subscribe to the database as the information source for industry monitoring.

Mechanism 4: Direct sale of data or data products

Corporations engage in the direct sale of raw data, processed data, or trade data products they have developed, thereby realising economic benefits associated with DATA by transferring the data (or data products) to external users. It is essential to note that due to the constraints imposed by data-related laws and regulations, corporations exercise caution in directly transferring relevant raw data, and such business models are relatively uncommon in practice.

Illustrative Example 7: The main business activity of technology corporation G is to collect, clean, label, process data and sell datasets to other corporations. Aiming to develop an AI technology-based coaching system, customer X intends to purchase image-data analysis products related to basketball sports from Corporation G. Both parties agree that, in compliance with relevant standards of data quality and quantity, Corporation G shall provide data analysis products and deliver the corresponding data products upon fulfilling contractual considerations. After delivery,

Corporation G commits to completely deleting the original raw and derivative data, refraining from transferring or authorising other parties to use them. Unless regulatory authorities mandate otherwise, Corporation G shall not disclose information on the source, scale, or quality of the original data or the modified data products; failure to adhere to this agreement would result in a breach of contract.

Illustrative Example 8: Corporation H specialises in collecting and analysing online textual data and language corpora. After collecting and processing these data, Corporation H sells them to other technology corporations. Based on the judgment of the market demand in the field of AI, Corporation H takes the initiative to collect the voice data of different age groups, genders, regions, and life and work scenarios of a small language, forming a unique dataset ready for future sale to relevant corporate customers.

Mechanism 5: Establish internet platform to generate (or exchange) data contents

Illustrative Example 9: An internet Corporation, J, establishes an internet platform and provides digital technologies to assist users in generating valuable user-generated content (UGC), such as photos or videos. Users can share these UGCs based on digital technologies provided by J. DATA, which are generated and accumulated through interactions between corporations and users and among users, constitute a continuous value co-creation process.

Under the model of digital industrialisation, corporations adopt a value-creation business model directly through data-based products or services. As such, a major element of the expenditures of such corporations are related to the maintenance of existing products and the development of new products.

Comparisons of DATA with other intangibles – issues with ownership uncertainties

Regarding the controllability condition with respect to the asset definition, it is essential to recognise that control rights related to data are diverse. These rights encompass data collection rights, data usage rights, data processing rights, data trading rights, and data product income rights. Controllability, in an accounting context, does not exclusively pertain to legal ownership rights. Therefore, it becomes crucial to ascertain which economic rights of data are controlled by the reporting entity and whether these rights align with the definition of “controllability” under accounting concepts. In cases where determining legal ownership rights is challenging, it is vital to evaluate whether the reporting entity possesses other rights to the data and is entitled to generate economic benefits related to those rights.

The entire value-creation process of data involves generation/collection, recording, cleaning, pre-processing, storage, analysis, and utilisation (see section Discussions and conclusions for a more detailed illustration). As the actual controller of the data, the reporting entity dominates this data utilisation process. To realise the value of the data, the entity often makes corresponding investments in DATA and bears corresponding costs and, ultimately, the entity is in possession of the processed data or data products developed. The economic rights of the data may be rightfully attributed to the controller, aligning with the principles of “controllability” and “inflow of economic benefits” in accounting concepts.

Notably, in China’s recently issued regulatory document - The Opinions on Building Fundamental Systems to Better Play the Role of Data Elements, there is a proposal to define legal rights based on data source and data generation characteristics, establishing separate property right systems for:

- legal ownership of data,
- processing rights of data, and
- management rights of data products.

Comparisons of DATA with other intangibles – issues with measurement uncertainties

For DATA to be recognised as accounting assets, they must also satisfy the measurability condition - their value must be reliably measurable. Given the various types and forms of data, an effective evaluation of the value of data assets necessitates comprehensive consideration of multiple aspects/factors influencing their value.

First, compared with financial instruments on an active trading market, the external trading market of data assets is still in its early stage of development, and the market-based pricing mechanisms of data are relatively immature. Second, valuation models are more complex and could be less reliable; and, as a consequence, measuring data assets' values based on appraised models might bring “noise” to the balance sheet, conflicting with the “faithful representation” principle of financial reports. If reporting entities wish to present the fair value of data assets, they could engage external appraisal service providers to establish a valuation model, which might incur potential costs and face scrutiny during auditing processes.

PROPOSED ACCOUNTING TREATMENT OF DATA

This section presents our suggestions for the accounting treatment of corporate DATA under existing accounting standards. The proposed framework covers the classification, recognition, measurement, presentation, and disclosure of data assets. Additionally, we introduce relevant approaches recommended in the China MOF's "Provisions on Accounting Treatment of Corporate Data Resources (trial version)".

Classification of data assets

Based on the examples illustrated in the section Literature review, we show that economic values created by DATA are diverse under different mechanisms. We advocate against a broad categorisation of data assets. Instead, we recommend classifying corporate DATA based on their value-creation mechanisms. This includes internal-use data assets, tradable data assets, strategic value data resources, and other data resources. By considering the source of the data resources, we can further distinguish between internally generated DATA and externally acquired data assets.

Internally-used data assets

This data asset type is characterised as controllable, separately identifiable, measurable, and capable of generating future economic benefits for the reporting entity. They include data assets used exclusively within the entity, either purchased or internally generated through corporate activities and show the following characteristics:

- they are only used within the reporting entity; and
- they are of limited value to external entities, so they cannot be traded externally.

These assets can be listed as a separate line item as "intangible assets - internal-use data assets" on the balance sheet if recognition conditions are met.

Tradable data assets

This data asset type is characterised as controllable, measurable, tradable and able to generate future economic benefits for the reporting entity. Unlike internally-used data assets, tradable data assets have value beyond the reporting entity. They can be monetised in the market and traded through transactions to other entities (including transfer of ownership rights or grant of usage licenses). The different application scenarios largely determine the value of such data assets. This type of data asset might show significantly different values in different entities. Such data assets can be listed as a separate line item, such as "intangible assets - tradable data assets" on the balance sheet. Here are some additional examples of tradable data assets.

Illustrative Example 1: Corporation X collects data from different online sources and undertakes relevant processing approaches to these data. By performing data summary and analysis, corporation X creates a new database, a credit ratings database, and it provides query and verification services to other entities using the database via the API interface.

Illustrative Example 2: A power grid corporation Y collects the power consumption data of their corporate users. After excluding information involving corporate privacy and sensitive business secrets, corporation Y desensitises the data and analyses the power consumption data in-depth. Corporation Y forms a set of evaluation indicators and creates a database that external entities can use. Bank Z approaches Corporation Y to obtain evaluation indicators for its potential borrowing clients (with the authorisation of the clients). Based on the information on the client's electricity consumption behaviour, payment situation, electricity consumption level and trend, bank Z

improves its “client profiling” and enhances its business competitiveness related to anti-fraud, auxiliary credit scoring, and post-loan warnings. It pays Y according to the number of queries it requests from Y.

Illustrative Example 3: Telecommunication corporation Z creates a database of clients’ monthly call costs, payment amounts, arrears status, and other related operation data and creates client portrait products using internal data resources. Telecom Corporation Z then provides credit investigation support services for financial institutions. Potential loan clients may authorise financial institutions to query their historical transaction data from Z, and financial institutions pay Z according to the number of queries they request from Z.

Strategic value data resources

This type of data resource is characterised as being controllable, able to generate future economic benefits for the entity, and an irreversible core element of the corporate business model. Although not easily separable or tradable, it is indispensable to the entity's business strategy. Based on our survey conducted in Shenzhen, China, corporate DATA show substantial concentrations among sectors/entities referred to as “data-rich” entities. For example, DATA are primarily concentrated in internet corporations, hi-tech, pharmaceuticals, credit scoring/rating, software development, financial institutions and other key industries. Using data and other resources can bring significant economic benefits to the entity. For “data-rich” corporations, their market value is significantly correlated to the strategic value of the DATA they possess. Hence, they are more willing to invest in data resources.

However, such data assets cannot be transferred to other entities for various reasons, such as a lack of market demand, information asymmetry between entities, data privacy protection, or other legal issues. The measurement reliability of strategic value DATA is also relatively lacking, so it might be challenging to recognise them directly as intangible assets in the financial statements. Since these resources are closely related to corporate strategy, entities can apply materiality criteria when preparing financial reports and disclose more about these resources in management commentary or a narrative report.

Other data resources

Entities routinely generate or collect various data types from operations or business activities, backing them up without planning to invest or expecting future economic benefits. Using the materiality judgment, principal users of financial reports might not need related information about these resources. As a result, these are under the category of other data resources, and their accounting treatment is not detailed in this report.

Recognition of data assets

Recognition of externally acquired data assets

Considering the source of data resources, reporting entities can categorise them as externally acquired data assets or internally generated data resources. Like other externally acquired intangibles, externally acquired data assets can be directly recognised on the balance sheet and measured based on their trading value - agreed upon in contracts or market transactions. As business activities involving the purchase of data assets from external entities or direct trading of corporate data on data exchanges are still uncommon, however, this paper focuses on the accounting treatment of internally generated data assets.

Recognition of Internally Generated Data Assets

For internally-used data assets, to strengthen the principle of faithful representation and comparability of accounting information, it is important to carefully and strictly set the recognition conditions for internally generated data assets. In the trial stage, adherence to IAS 38 is recommended together with the modification of the conditional recognition conditions for Research and Development (R&D) expenses to create recognition conditions for internally generated data assets.

IAS 38 stipulates that entities can only capitalise R&D expenses during the development stage when certain recognition conditions are met. Similarly, the recognition conditions for internally-used data assets can be set based on the principles of “economic benefit inflow”, “controllability”, and “measurability” of data assets, which means that these assets are recognised only when the entity can provide evidence of the right to control the use of data, reliably measure the value of the assets, and able to derive economic benefits from them.

The process of generating data assets within the corporation can be divided into several steps. First, the data generation/collection step; second, the data recording, cleaning, pre-processing and storage step; third, the data analysis step under different application scenarios; and, finally, the data utilisation steps (as shown in Section 6). The first two steps might be considered the research stage, and the last two steps might be considered the development stage. For internally generated data assets, only expenses related to DATA in the development stage can be capitalised in the financial statements. Following the accounting treatment of R&D expenses in IAS 38, it is recommended that internally-used data assets can only be recognised in the financial statements under the following conditions:

- it is technically feasible to generate specific data assets and enable their use;
- entities have the intention to complete specific data assets and to use them as production factors;
- the data assets itself could generate economic benefits, including the ability to prove that the products produced by using the data assets exist in the market and/or that the data assets are valuable internally;
- sufficient technology, financial resources, and other resource support to complete the development (maintenance) of the data assets and the ability to use them; and
- expenditures attributable to the development phase of the data assets can be reliably measured.

For expenses related to internally generated intangibles that cannot be separately identified or cannot meet the recognition criteria of the IAS 38, the suggested accounting treatment is to include them as expenses (for example, in SGA as general expenses) in the income statement. Only when internal-used data assets meet the relevant recognition conditions of internally generated intangible assets can the entity capitalise relevant costs in the development stage as data assets.

For tradable data assets, additional conditions need to be set to evaluate their tradability, and it is recommended that the conditional recognition method be adopted. When certain “tradability” conditions are met, the entity can recognise the data assets in the financial statements as a separate line item (tradable DATA assets under specific intangibles). The recognition conditions of tradable data assets can be determined by reference to the standard framework of data exchanges for tradable data products. It is worth noting that currently, there are 39 data exchanges in China; among them, the Shenzhen Data Exchange and the Shanghai Data Exchange, that are actively

formulating comprehensive guidance on the tradability of data products and guidance on trading/settlement procedures.

Measurement of data assets: initial measurement

IAS 38 mandates that reporting entities employ the cost-based method for the initial measurement of intangibles. In the case of externally acquired data assets, the cost of purchased intangible assets includes the purchase price, relevant taxes and other expenses directly attributable to achieving the intended use of such assets.

For internal-use data assets, a cost-based measurement method is typically applied during the initial measurement, given the absence of a well-defined data asset trading market. In practice, what kind of costs could be capitalised is still under debate - we will explore further issues of cost allocation and cost recording (booking) system in the section Discussions and conclusions.

Concerning tradable data assets, there are areas in which some stakeholders propose to make amendments to IAS 38, particularly in the area of measurement approaches. While IAS 38 currently allows only a cost-based measurement approach for internally generated intangibles, tradable data assets, subject to transactions between different entities, might possess a comparable market transaction price close to their intrinsic value. Therefore, some advocates suggest considering the reference transaction price of similar data assets for the initial measurement of tradeable data assets.

For example, when comparable historical transactions or an active market quotation for similar data assets exist, a fair value method (market method) might be a viable option for the initial measurement. A gain or loss on the subsequent measurements would need to be recognised in the P&L. In the absence of an active market quotation, the adjusted market comparable price or cost-based method can be used to determine fair value.

Preliminary research has offered insights into valuation models based on market or income models for data assets. Deloitte (2019) posits that the value of data assets is reflected in their benefits or potential benefits to specific entities. The factors affecting the value of data assets are from four dimensions: quantity, quality, application scenario, and risk. Valuation of data assets can also be done based on models from professional appraisal entities. The China Asset Appraisal Association's "The Data Asset Assessment Guidance" (CAAA 2023) suggests evaluation methods to determine the value of data assets, including income, cost, market, and derivative methods.

Since valuation methods involve numerous parameters and inputs, primarily reliant on professional estimates, reporting entities would need to disclose the logic of the valuation model, assumptions of future cash flow forecasts, and model parameters in the financial notes or a separate narrative report. This enhanced disclosure aims to help principal users of financial reporting to understand the benefits and limitations of the valuation figure for making informed investment decisions.

For unrecognised strategic value data resources, reporting entities are encouraged to illustrate the contributions of these resources to the entities' market value, that is, the reference value to the corporate's business.

Illustrative Example: Since strategic value data resources hold value only for reporting entities themselves, reporting entities may voluntarily disclose the reference value using internal valuation models. For example, they could adopt the net market value-added approach to give a reference value. That is, first, estimate corporate market value (MV1) considering the strategic value data resources; second, estimate corporate market value (MV0) when these resources are excluded;

and third, calculate the difference between MV1 and MV0. as the reference value of the strategic value data resources.

Measurement of data assets: subsequent measurement

Considering the types and characteristics of data resources, reporting entities must make reasonable estimations of the service life of data assets and continuously monitor DATA assets' impairment using external and internal information sources.

In the subsequent measurement stage, for internally-used data assets utilised by reporting entities with a limited-service life, an appropriate amortisation method should be selected for amortisation based on their expected useful lives. The amortisation amount for data assets shall be recorded in the current profit and loss account in a separately identified line item. At the same time, the amount of consideration received by the corporation from customers should be recognised as relevant income, with input costs recognised as contract performance costs.

Data assets with uncertain service lives should be tested for impairment periodically. The reporting entity must assess whether there are signs of potential impairment on the balance sheet date. If such signs are present, adjustments to the provision for impairment should be made, and the recoverable amount estimated. Should the recoverable amount measurement indicate that the recoverable amounts of the assets are less than their carrying amounts, the asset's carrying amounts should be written down to the recoverable amounts. The written-down amounts are recognised as asset impairment losses and recorded in the current profit and loss statement. A corresponding asset impairment provision is made simultaneously.

It is crucial to note that data assets exhibit characteristics of value variability. Hence, reporting entities should continually monitor relevant aspects such as business models, limitations of usage rights, timeliness, product or technology innovations, and similar and competitive products. Timely and comprehensive impairment tests should be conducted, and provisions for impairment should be created as necessary.

Lastly, it is worth noting that data assets show the characteristics of disruptive upgrading/iteration, so complete write-offs of the data assets may occur. The current income statement should include the write-off amount for derecognised data assets in a separately identified line item. The amount of the complete write-off should be checked against the expense loss item in the income statement.

Presentation of data assets

In preparing the balance sheet, the reporting entity shall, following the materiality principle and the actual situation of the corporation, incorporate corresponding line items under relevant financial statement items. This ensures a direct reflection of the value associated with the corporation's data resources.

We recommend the inclusion of the net value of data assets listed as a distinct separate line item under the intangible assets account on the balance sheet. This might allow information users to discern the proportion and changes of data assets within corporate assets, enabling a more comprehensive evaluation of future opportunities and potential risks.

To provide a detailed breakdown, a dynamic adjustment table for the amounts of various types of data assets at the end of the reporting period can be added to the notes of financial statements. This table would encompass the amounts of various data assets at the beginning of the reporting

period, the increments (or decrements) during the reporting period, the amounts formed, purchased, sold, impaired, or written off within the period, and the final figures for different types of data assets at the end of the reporting period. This supplementary information enhances transparency and facilitates a deeper understanding of the dynamics surrounding data assets.

Disclosure of data assets

As for now, no existing accounting standards mandate the disclosure of quantitative or qualitative information regarding data assets in financial reports. Elevating the disclosure of corporate data assets holds intrinsic value for several reasons.

Illustrate strategic value drivers

Given that material DATA can serve as crucial value drivers for some companies' corporate strategies and business models, enhanced disclosure provides users of financial reports with a deeper understanding of the role data assets play in corporate value creation for those companies, thereby shedding light on associated risks and opportunities.

Support investor decision-making

Increased disclosure might offer investors valuable information for their decision-making processes, improving the overall value relevance of financial reporting.

Enhance information comparability

Expanding disclosure requirements, particularly regarding valuation methods related to DATA, might contribute to increased information comparability across entities within the same industry. In alignment with the information needs of stakeholders, China's "Provisions on Accounting Treatment of Corporate Data Resources" advocates a "compulsory plus voluntary disclosure" approach. On the one hand, it refines the information required by accounting standards; on the other hand, it encourages and guides corporations to continuously strengthen voluntary disclosure and provides more information related to the value of DATA to stakeholders. It also proposes that disclosure of data assets can specifically focus on the following two aspects: information on the data assets themselves and information related to data assets that can help third parties evaluate the contribution of data assets to corporate value.

We propose that, for recognised data assets in financial statements, such as internal-use data assets and tradable data assets, relevant information should be disclosed in the notes to the financial statements. The disclosure may encompass information on the formation, storage, investment, impairment, write-off of data assets and the net value at the end of the period. For unrecognised data resources, such as strategic value data resources, relevant information can be disclosed in narrative reports, such as management commentary (MC), integrated reports or sustainability disclosure reports.

Specific recommendations for disclosure concerning data assets include:

Source or generation process of data assets

Reporting corporations should disclose how data assets are generated within the entity or obtained (for example, whether obtained through a data exchange or agents). Qualitative information related to data assets might include the types, permissions or restrictions on the rights of data assets and other issues related to the ownership and usage of data assets. For example, in some jurisdictions, an entity must prohibit using certain types of data information, such as relatively private customer data, to benefit itself.

Value creation and business model contribution

Reporting corporations are encouraged to disclose how data assets contribute to corporate value and the business model, primarily how they yield economic benefits, detailing application scenarios related to customers, products, operations, or management. However, if such information is proprietary or involves the firm giving away its competitive advantage, the reporting entity might be granted a waiver on such disclosure.

Additional information related to data assets

Reporting corporations should disclose data types, structures, investment maintenance inputs/costs, and amortisation methods. The quality of the data assets, like the level of standardisation, accuracy, timeliness, reliability, etc, and information about DATA likely to be recognised as data assets in the future: for example, how the corporation plans to transform its business model in the future and plans to use original customer/channel information for enhanced product marketing capabilities.

Measurement model information

Reporting corporations should disclose information on the measurement model of data assets, including the valuation method, model parameters, and the basis of estimators (like future cash flows in the income-based model).

Risk factors affecting data assets

Reporting corporations should disclose information on risk factors affecting data assets, countermeasures taken to handle related risks/opportunities, managing, mitigating, or exploiting risks/opportunities, security measures related to data, and legal compliance issues.

In conclusion, given the intricate nature of corporate data resources, especially the complexity of their ownership rights, value creation mechanisms, and measurement methods, comprehensive qualitative and quantitative disclosure of data assets is encouraged. This not only increases credibility but also empowers external users to make informed value judgments and decisions.

CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR THE ACCOUNTING TREATMENT OF DATA ASSETS

The challenges in incorporating corporate DATA into financial statements are multifaceted. One of the primary challenges in recognising data assets on financial statements is the inadequate understanding of the processes through which these data assets are formed. If the processes cannot be clearly identified, it is difficult to see how relevant costs can be identified. Complexities might arise from internal organisational structural issues, redundant resource utilisation between departments, and intricate personnel deployment which hinder the aggregation and allocation of costs for data assets, particularly when applying the historical cost method for initial measurement. Companies would need to enhance their business processes, align organisational structures with data product development, and efficiently manage activities from raw data to data products to allow for the different accounting treatments for DATA suggested above.

A further hurdle faced is in matching the costs associated with data asset income. The incongruity between the final usage and development models for data products, driven by their non-exclusive and highly adaptable nature, leads to challenges in cost allocation across different business lines. Third, distinguishing between the capitalisation and expensing of DATA proves challenging due to uncertainties in determining the timing of the research and development phase for these products. The lack of clear guidelines complicates the accounting treatment, especially for internally generated data resources.

Additionally, there is a difficulty in determining the amortisation period for data assets, given the inherent variability in the time-based usefulness of these assets. The challenge lies in identifying factors influencing the economic benefits' lifespan (the service period), leading to uncertainty in determining the amortisation period. For data assets with an uncertain service period, impairment testing is recommended. This testing poses difficulties due to the absence of an active market and the significant fluctuation of data asset values over data product life cycles.

Lastly, the variability in the value of data assets, heavily dependent on their application scenarios, creates a challenge in justifying their recognised values in financial statements. In extreme cases, changes in application scenarios, data asset-sharing policies, or external factors may render data assets valueless, resulting in a sudden increase in extraordinary expenses. To mitigate these impacts, companies are advised to prioritise comprehensive information disclosure to meet diverse user needs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we propose that, in addition to discussing the general connotations, attributes, and functions of corporate DATA, the accounting treatment of corporate data assets should focus more on the diversity of value-creation mechanisms of different types of DATA.

First, internal-use data assets, tradable data assets, and strategic value data resources differ in their mechanisms and contributions to corporate value creation and in the reliability of their measurement methods. Thus, the presentation and disclosure in financial statements should reflect these differences.

Second, the classification and measurement of data assets should consider their role in the business model, with their value creation mechanisms disclosed in the notes to financial statements or qualitative narrative reports.

In summary, recognising corporate DATA in financial statements might reveal and enhance the value creation process of corporate DATA, contributing to the high-quality development of the digital economy. With the rapid development of the digital economy globally, data's importance as a production factor is increasing, particularly as its use and integration in various scenarios enhances its economic value. The critical consideration for accounting standard setters should focus on both if and how DATA are recognised in financial statements, emphasising their separate disclosure to hopefully better reveal the digital economy's impact on corporate operations and boost the digital transformation process in the reporting entities. Future research is urged to may further refining the type of controllability of data assets and promoting more orderly transactions of data based on confirmed rights as well as develop more reliable valuation models of data assets.

If enhanced reporting concerning DATA is seen as desirable, enhanced supporting mechanisms would be useful. For example, the further development of data trading venues, data exchanges, matching supply and demand better, and enlarging the scale of orderly data assets transactions would help accounting measurements. As data transaction volume increases, the tradability and value discovery of data assets will gain wider recognition, leading to the accumulation of best practices. However, it is unclear whether such market activities will flourish for the purposes of enhancing corporate accounting.

Additionally, the development of third-party supporting services for data asset compliance certification, rating, custody, and valuation and enhancing the audit procedures for data assets, would also be useful, forming a solid guarantee for the recognition of data assets in financial statements.

Lastly, corporations could find it useful to focus on the complexity of data across various value dimensions, thoroughly assess financial report users' information needs, and analyse in-depth the value creation mechanisms and paths of different corporate DATA. Moreover, by improving the classification, measurement, presentation, and disclosure of corporate data asset information, reporting corporations could aid users in assessing corporate value and assisting corporations in their digital transformation process and the efficient execution of digital business strategies.

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