

An Introduction to XBRL

Source: XBRL website <http://www.xbrl.org>



XBRL is a language for the electronic communication of business and financial data which is revolutionising business reporting around the world. It provides major benefits in the preparation, analysis and communication of business information. It offers cost savings, greater efficiency and improved accuracy and reliability to all those involved in supplying or using financial data.

XBRL stands for e**X**tensible **B**usiness **R**eporting **L**anguage. It is one of a family of "XML" languages which is becoming a standard means of communicating information between businesses and on the internet.

XBRL is being developed by an international non-profit consortium of approximately 400 major companies, organisations and government agencies. **It is an open standard, free of licence fees.** It is already being put to practical use in a number of countries and implementations of XBRL are growing rapidly around the world.

This site provides information about the nature, uses and benefits of XBRL. It explains how individuals and companies can join the effort to move forward and make use of the language.

A Simple Explanation

The idea behind XBRL, eXtensible Business Reporting Language, is simple. Instead of treating financial information as a block of text - as in a standard internet page or a printed document - it provides an identifying tag for each individual item of data. This is computer readable. For example, company net profit has its own unique tag.

The introduction of XBRL tags enables automated processing of business information by computer software, cutting out laborious and costly processes of manual re-entry and comparison. Computers can treat XBRL data "intelligently": they can recognise the information in a XBRL document, select it, analyse it, store it, exchange it with other computers and present it automatically in a variety of ways for users. XBRL greatly increases the speed of handling of financial data, reduces the chance of error and permits automatic checking of information.

Companies can use XBRL to save costs and streamline their processes for collecting and reporting financial information. Consumers of financial data, including investors, analysts, financial institutions and regulators, can receive, find, compare and analyse data much more rapidly and efficiently if it is in XBRL format.

XBRL can handle data in different languages and accounting standards. It can flexibly be adapted to meet different requirements and uses. Data can be transformed into XBRL by suitable mapping tools or it can be generated in XBRL by appropriate software.

The *How XBRL Works* (<http://www.xbrl.org/HowXBRLWorks/>) page gives further explanation of XBRL, while *Benefits and Uses* (<http://www.xbrl.org/BenefitsAndUses/>) page sets out how different types of organisation can gain from the standard.

How XBRL Works

XBRL is a member of the family of languages based on XML, or Extensible Markup Language, which is a standard for the electronic exchange of data between businesses and on the internet. Under XML, identifying tags are applied to items of data so that they can be processed efficiently by computer software.

XBRL is a powerful and flexible version of XML which has been defined specifically to meet the requirements of business and financial information. It enables unique identifying tags to be applied to items of financial data, such as 'net profit'. However, these are more than simple identifiers. They provide a range of information about the item, such as whether it is a monetary item, percentage or fraction. XBRL allows labels in any language to be applied to items, as well as accounting references or other subsidiary information.

XBRL can show how items are related to one another. It can thus represent how they are calculated. It can also identify whether they fall into particular groupings for organisational or presentational purposes. Most importantly, XBRL is easily extensible, so companies and other organisations can adapt it to meet a variety of special requirements.

The rich and powerful structure of XBRL allows very efficient handling of business data by computer software. It supports all the standard tasks involved in compiling, storing and using business data. Such information can be converted into XBRL by suitable mapping processes or generated in XBRL by software. It can then be searched, selected, exchanged or analysed by computer, or published for ordinary viewing.

The **XBRL Specification**, published on the site (<http://www.xbrl.org/SpecRecommendations/>), provides the technical definition of how XBRL works.

XBRL Taxonomies, also published via this site, are the dictionaries which the language uses. These are the categorisation schemes which define the specific tags for individual items of data (such as "net profit"). National jurisdictions have different accounting regulations, so each may have its own taxonomy for financial reporting (<http://www.xbrl.org/FRTaxonomies/>). Many different organisations, including regulators, specific industries or even companies, may also require taxonomies to cover their own business reporting needs. A special taxonomy has also been designed to support collation of data and internal reporting within organisations. This is the GL taxonomy (<http://www.xbrl.org/GLTaxonomy/>).

Ordinary users of XBRL may be largely or totally unaware of the technical infrastructure which underpins the language. However, software companies, such as accountancy software providers, need to take account of XBRL and its features when producing their products.

A small example of XBRL and the data which it represents you can find here: <http://www.xbrl.org/Example1/>.

The *Education and Training* (<http://www.xbrl.org/EducationAndTraining/>) section and the *Technical Support* (<http://www.xbrl.org/TechSupport/>) section provide more information on how XBRL works.

Benefits and Beneficiaries

XBRL offers major benefits at all stages of business reporting and analysis. The benefits are seen in automation, cost saving, faster, more reliable and more accurate handling of data, improved analysis and in better quality of information and decision-making.

XBRL enables producers and consumers of financial data to switch resources away from costly manual processes, typically involving time-consuming comparison, assembly and re-entry of data. They are able to concentrate effort on analysis, aided by software which can validate and manipulate XBRL information. As just one example, searches for

particular information which might in the past have taken hours can be completed with XBRL in a fraction of a second.

Those who stand to benefit include all who collect business data, including governments, regulators, economic agencies, stock exchanges, financial information companies and the like, and those who produce or use it, including accountants, auditors, company managers, financial analysts, investors and creditors. Among those who can take advantage of XBRL include accountancy software vendors, the financial services industry, investor relations companies and the information technology industry.

The *XBRL and Business* (<http://www.xbrl.org/XBRLandBusiness/>) section explains how particular types of organisation can benefit from XBRL.

The use of XBRL does not imply an enforced standardisation of financial reporting. On the contrary, the language is a flexible one which is intended to support all current aspects of reporting in different countries and industries. Its extensible nature means that it can be adjusted to meet particular business requirements, even at the individual organisation level.

Benefits and Uses for Business

All types of organisations can use XBRL to save costs and improve efficiency in handling business and financial information. Because XBRL is extensible and flexible, it can be adapted to a wide variety of different requirements. All participants in the financial information supply chain can benefit, whether they are preparers, transmitters or users of business data.

Data Collection and Reporting

By using XBRL, companies and other producers of financial data and business reports can automate the processes of data collection. For example, data from different company divisions with different accounting systems can be assembled quickly, cheaply and efficiently if the sources of information have been upgraded to using XBRL. Once data is gathered in XBRL, different types of reports using varying subsets of the data can be produced with minimum effort. A company finance division, for example, could quickly and reliably generate internal management reports, financial statements for publication, tax and other regulatory filings, as well as credit reports for lenders. Not only can data handling be automated, removing time-consuming, error-prone processes, but the data can be checked by software for accuracy.

Small businesses can benefit alongside large ones by standardising and simplifying their assembly and filing of information to the authorities.

Data Consumption and Analysis

Users of data which is received electronically in XBRL can automate its handling, cutting out time-consuming and costly collation and re-entry of information. Software can also immediately validate the data, highlighting errors and gaps which can immediately be addressed. It can also help in analysing, selecting, and processing the data for re-use. Human effort can switch to higher, more value-added aspects of analysis, review, reporting and decision-making. In this way, investment analysts can save effort, greatly simplify the selection and comparison of data, and deepen their company analysis. Lenders can save costs and speed up their dealings with borrowers. Regulators and government departments can assemble, validate and review data much more efficiently and usefully than they have hitherto been able to do.

Other pages in this section explain how specific types of organisation can benefit from XBRL and how they can take steps to adopt it.