Are firms on the right page with Chapter 11? An analysis of firm choices that contribute to post-bankruptcy survival

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Historically, corporate bankruptcy reorganization has generated varying results with respect to subsequent firm performance. Some firms reorganize effectively and emerge as more efficient and productive enterprises. However, other inefficient companies strive to survive by utilizing the rehabilitative process of Chapter 11; though liquidation might be a more suitable course of action. This study investigates which characteristics of firm performance and Chapter 11 bankruptcy are linked to successful emergence upon reorganization. We find that the strongest contributor to post-bankruptcy survival is having new management in place. This suggests that Chapter 11 can be utilized as an effective rehabilitative tool in the ‘right hands’.

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I. Introduction

Capitalism without bankruptcy is like Christianity without hell.

-Frank Borman

During recessionary times, mere firm survival often takes precedence to return levels for business persons, politicians and citizens alike. While the preponderance of troubled companies during economic downturns can be disheartening, it does not necessarily signal the end.

Firms in the United States have the option to reorganize under Chapter 11 and emerge as efficient enterprises.\textsuperscript{1} Yet, various studies of post-reorganization firm returns have demonstrated inconsistent results which serve as a basis for criticism of the US bankruptcy code. While the introduction of Chapter 11 was meant to rehabilitate (as opposed to liquidate) companies unable to repay their creditors, Hotchkiss (1995) argued that firms emerging from bankruptcy with the same pre-bankruptcy management in place are more likely to
suffer losses or poor performance. She explains that incumbent managers of failing companies have their personal reputations and fortunes on the line and as a result tend to favour reorganization rather than liquidation. This self-serving behaviour often leads to the continuation of an inefficient company that continues to endure losses. Conversely, Morrison (2007) showed that continuation bias (i.e. Chapter 11 instead of Chapter 7) is either absent or empirically unimportant for small business bankruptcies.

In contrast to Hotchkiss (1995), Alderson and Betker (1999) also used cash flows measures but found post-bankruptcy companies outperformed their benchmarks. Additionally, Eberhart et al. (1999) found large positive returns for 131 companies emerging from bankruptcy between 1980 and 1989. Unlike Dawley et al. (2002), who found positive correlations between firm strategic choices and refocusing variables and performance measures, Eberhart et al. (1999) stated that companies which change their line of business after emerging from Chapter 11 may face greater value estimation risks.

Denis and Rodgers (2007) found that firms with greater assets are ‘more likely to reorganize than to liquidate or be acquired’ and that ‘higher quality firms and those in higher margin industries spend less time in Chapter 11’.

Given the divergent results from the differing valuation techniques utilized, performance measures used and firm characteristics evaluated, the question of what choice variables most influence post-bankruptcy survival still remains open. With these considerations in mind, the focus of this article is to analyse both firm characteristics and firm choices that influence the post-bankruptcy outcomes (as opposed to returns) of publicly traded business in the United States. Specifically, we examine which factors contribute to post-reorganization performance with regard to whether the firm is active after emergence from bankruptcy. We find that the strongest contributor to post-bankruptcy survival is having new management in place. Thus, our results indicate that bankruptcy can be a viable tool for reorganization and rehabilitation, if appropriately implemented.

## II. Data

Our sample includes 131 publicly traded companies that reorganized under Securities and Exchange Commission Chapter 11 filings between 1997 and 2002. For each firm, financial data including asset value, net sales, net income and Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code information from 5 years prior to their Chapter 11 filing through 5 years after their Chapter 11 filing were obtained from Mergent Online and Hoovers. Information concerning duration (in months) of time spent under Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection as well as the subsequent outcome of reorganization (active, merger, acquired, privatized, liquidated, bankruptcy) was collected from S&P Market Insight. Bankruptcy process variables were obtained from the Bankruptcy Research Database and include filing party (debtors or creditors) and filing type (prepackaged, prenegotiated or nonprepackages/nonprenegotiated). Firm management information was obtained from ‘The Corporate Library’.

Figure 1 illustrates that the firms in the sample are not concentrated in any one particular industry. Table 1 shows that 97.6% of firms in the sample filed debtor initiated bankruptcies. Figure 2 shows that 10% of companies in the sample utilized prepackaged filing types. Unfortunately, many companies in the sample that emerge from Chapter 11 invariably fall prey to the same problems that previously plagued them and subsequently liquidate or file bankruptcy again (see Fig. 3). Notably, while only 23.7% of the sample remains active within 5 years after reorganization, 64.9% of the companies exist as a (or some part of a) going concern (active, acquired, merged or privatized) within 5 years of filing for Chapter 11.

Our analysis focuses on three major types of firm choices: management, bankruptcy type and duration and how these factors contribute to firm survival (see Table 2). New management indicates if the CEO has been with the firm for 1 year or less. Table 2 shows that over 23% of the active companies have new management in place while none of the second bankruptcy or liquidated companies have new management. Due to a shift in management-controlled bankruptcies, the
percent of firms with new management for the time period in our sample is substantially smaller than for other time periods studied.\textsuperscript{5}

### III. Econometric Analysis and Results

To evaluate the firm characteristics which are linked to successful emergence from bankruptcy, we utilize a probit regression model in which the dependent variable is a dummy variable for outcome (active dummy variable or second bankruptcy/liquidated dummy variable) post bankruptcy.\textsuperscript{6} The model specification is

$$y_{it} = \sum_{k=1}^{K} \beta_k X_{ikt}$$

where $X_{ikt}$ contains company characteristic variables: prepackaged filing type dummy variable, prenegotiated filing type dummy, new management dummy variable, log of assets, log of net income, log of net

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\textsuperscript{5} The sample in Hotchkiss (1995) had management turnover in nearly 70% of reorganized firms spanning 1979–1988 during the leverage buy-out boom of the 1980s. During this period of corporate raiding and intense competitive pressure to buoy stock prices, profitable healthy firms entered bankruptcy with the intention of being liquidated. Other companies were forced into bankruptcy after pursuing defensive poison pill strategies. Though liquidations through leveraged buy-outs were debtor controlled, they are not truly management prerogatives, despite high management turnover.

\textsuperscript{6} Due to the small number of second bankruptcy and liquidation observations, we combine these outcomes for the probit regression.
sales, time spent under bankruptcy protection, electric, gas and sanitary services industry dummy variable and year dummy variables.

The first two columns of Table 3 provide results from probits in which the dependent variable is a dummy variable for active firm post bankruptcy. The first column includes firm characteristic control variables while the second column includes a new management dummy variable. Time spent under bankruptcy protection is weakly significantly related to the probability of post-bankruptcy survival in the first column and significantly increases the probability of post-bankruptcy survival in the second column. Having new management dummy variable increases the probability of being an active firm post bankruptcy by 0.0451 and is significant at the 1% level. This result indicates that new management is critical to post-bankruptcy firm survival. Moreover, this result is consistent with the Hotchkiss (1995) finding that firms emerging from bankruptcy with the same pre-bankruptcy management are more likely to perform poorly. Indeed, efforts to restructure a company or to identify recurring problems may be thwarted by pre-bankruptcy management that feel responsible for and thus defensive about the distressed performance. A new CEO, likely lacking a golden parachute or vested personal interest in the company, may be better suited to lead a restructuring or refocusing of business lines which has been shown by Dawley et al. (2002) to increase post-reorganization performance.

From column 3 of Table 3, one can see that time spent under bankruptcy protection is positively associated with the probability of the firm being liquidated or entering bankruptcy a second time and is significant at the 5% level. An interpretation of the association between time spent under bankruptcy and likelihood of liquidation is that the current bankruptcy code may allow insolvent firms to operate longer than they should. A frequent criticism of Chapter 11 is that it creates some structural inertia as firms that should be liquidated expediently are instead put on ‘life support’.

### IV. Conclusions

During economic downturns firm survival is often deemed to be paramount to return levels (see, e.g. de la Mercé and Glater (2009)). Thus, an understanding
of the choice variables that facilitate post-Chapter 11 firm survival (as opposed to performance) is vital to the US economy. Our results indicate that time spent under bankruptcy protection is not necessarily the most important metric for evaluating the ‘success’ of Chapter 11 as a rehabilitative process. There is evidence of a positive link between bankruptcy duration and the probability of being active post bankruptcy. However, our research also suggests that longer periods of recovery in bankruptcy protection are positively correlated with secondary bankruptcies and liquidations.

The strongest contributor to post-bankruptcy survival is having new management in place. Thus, our results indicate that in the ‘right hands’, bankruptcy is a viable tool for reorganization and rehabilitation. Carefully planned, surgical bankruptcies or prepackaged bankruptcies increase the probability of successful outcomes. Additionally, newly appointed leaders at the helm of these corporations have the ability to pursue novel strategies and refocus efforts without the same public scrutiny and second-guessing that may plague the previous management.

Moreover, these executives offer fresh insight and valuable outside perspectives imperative for corporate turnarounds.

References


