

# Chapter 11 - The Efficient Market Hypothesis

Richard Herron

D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University

Kendall (1953) found no predictable pattern in stock price changes!

- Prices were as likely to go up as to go down on any particular day, regardless of past performance
- At first, this finding was shocking!
- But, Eugene Fama's Ph.D. dissertation highlighted that any information that could predict stock prices should already be reflected in stock prices
- For example, as soon as any information indicates that a stock is underpriced, investors flock to buy the stock and immediately bid up its price to a fair level
- From this fair level, we only expect ordinary rates of return that compensate for the risk of the stock

## Stock prices should follow a *random walk*

- If stock prices are bid immediately to fair levels that incorporate all available information
- Then stock prices must only respond to *new* information
- By definition, new information is unpredictable
- Therefore, stock prices that change in response to new information must also move unpredictably and follow a *random walk*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Strictly speaking, stock prices follow a submartingale, and the expected price change can be positive to compensate for the time value of money and systematic risk. A random walk is more restrictive—successive stock returns are independent and identically distributed.

The efficient markets hypothesis (EMH) is the notion that stock prices already reflect all available information

- If stock price changes were predictable
- Then that would be evidence that stock prices do not reflect all available information
- Note that here *efficient* has a different meaning than in Chapter 7
  - Here, in Chapter 11, an informationally efficient market is one where prices quickly reflect new information
  - In Chapter 7, an efficient portfolio is one with the highest expected return for a given level of risk
- There is ample empirical evidence that U.S. equity markets are informationally efficient

In most takeover attempts, the acquiring firm offers a large premium to the market price of the target firm, and target firm price jumps on the announcement

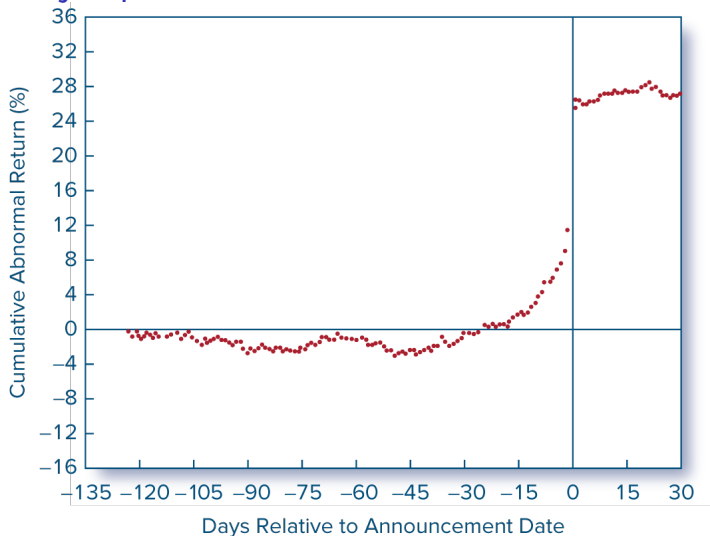


Figure 1: Cumulative abnormal returns before takeover attempts (DKM

## Intraday price changes provide more evidence of market efficiency

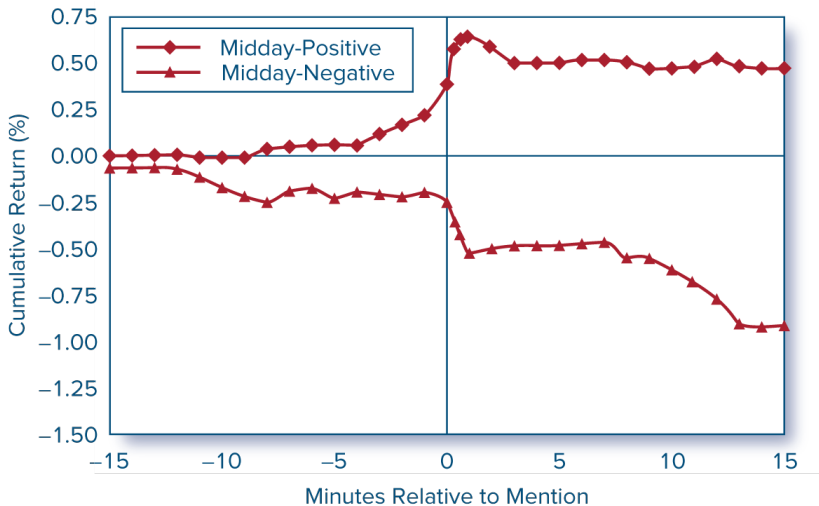


Figure 2: Stock price reaction to CNBC reports. The figure shows the reach of stock prices to on-air stock reports during the “Midday Call”

# Competition is the source of market efficiency

- Information is the most valuable financial commodity
- Higher returns motivate information-gathering
- Competition among investors assures prices reflect all available information
- However, recall that Grossman and Stiglitz (1980) paradox that perfectly efficient markets are impossible
  - Diminishing marginal returns on research activity suggest only managers of the largest portfolios will find it useful
  - Eventually, the cost of more information exceeds its benefit, and this new information will not be collected and incorporated into prices

## We typically distinguish three versions of the EMH

- *Weak-form* asserts that stock prices already reflect all information contained in the history of past prices, implying that technical analysis is not useful
- *Semistrong-form* asserts that stock prices already reflect all publicly available information, implying that fundamental analysis is not useful
- *Strong-form* asserts that stock prices reflect all relevant information, including insider information, implying that insider trading is not profitable
- All three versions assert that prices should reflect *available* information
- Under the EMH, prices are correct on average but can be too high or too low in *hindsight*



## Technical analysis is the search for predictable patterns in stock prices

- Key to success is a sluggish response of stock prices to fundamental supply-and-demand factors
- Weak-form EMH implies technical analysis should be fruitless
- If there were profitable patterns, traders would exploit them until they no longer work, so we expect profitable patterns to be *self-destructing*

## Fundamental analysis uses the prospects of the firm to determine proper stock prices

- Focuses on such determinants as earnings and dividends prospects, expectations for future interest rates, and risk evaluation
- Seeks to find firms that are *mispriced*
- Semistrong-form EMH predicts that *most* fundamental analysis should be fruitless and only *unique* insights will be rewarded
- The trick is not to identify *good* firms but firms that are *better* than everyone else's estimates because market prices already reflect commonly known information

EMH proponents believe active management is largely a wasted effort and unlikely to justify its expense; They advocate for passive investment, instead

- Active management
  - Attempts to beat the market by timing the market or through superior security selection
  - An expensive strategy
  - Suitable for very large portfolios
- Passive management
  - No attempt to outsmart the market
  - Accept EMH
  - Index Funds and ETFs
  - Low-cost strategy

## Still, portfolio management has a role in an efficient market!

- Portfolio management still provides:
  - Diversified portfolios with the desired amount of systematic risk
  - Portfolios that consider taxes (e.g., high-tax-bracket investors may prefer tax-exempt municipal bonds, capital gains instead of dividends, and real estate investments)
  - Portfolios that consider risk tolerance (e.g., older investors may want to conserve principal, and younger investors may want inflation-indexed bonds)
- Portfolio management can still provide value when all securities are perfectly priced

# Capital market prices guide the allocation of real resources

- Inefficient markets result in systematic resource misallocation
  - Corporations with overvalued securities could raise capital too cheaply
  - Corporations with undervalued securities may pass on profitable opportunities because the cost of raising capital is too high
- For example, in the U.S., the dot-com run-up of the late 1990s led to overinvestment in technology and telecommunication firms
- However, an efficient market does not have perfect foresight because “all available information” is still incomplete information, and the future is not perfectly predictable

# An event study is a technique to measure the impact of an event on stock returns

- For example, we might want to understand the impact of dividend changes on stock returns
- It is not trivial to isolate the impact of an event on stock returns because stock prices respond to a wide range of economic news
- First, we need a benchmark for what the stock return would have been in the absence of the event
- The *abnormal return* is the difference between the actual return and this benchmark
- There are several benchmarks
  - A broad market index, so the abnormal return is the difference between the stock and broad market index returns
  - An asset-pricing model, such as the CAPM or Fama-French three-factor model, so the abnormal return is the difference between the stock returns and the *expected return* from the model

## BKM use the “market model” to estimate abnormal returns

- Under the market model, the stock return is

$$r_t = a + br_{Mt} + e_t$$

which we can rearrange to isolate the residual or abnormal return  $e_t$  as

$$e_t = r_t - (a + br_{Mt})$$

- This approach is flexible and can include additional factors
- It is important to estimate  $a$  and  $b$  using data not influenced by the event (i.e., use data separated in time)
- Often, there is “leakage” where some investors are aware of the event in advance and profit from it
- We can see this leakage above in Figure 11.1
- To avoid these concerns, some researchers use a size-matched benchmark instead of estimating  $a$  and  $b$
- A cumulative abnormal return (CAR) sums abnormal returns over a period to capture the total firm-specific price change, reducing concerns about leakage and averaging out noise

Let us revisit Figure 11.1 with our new understanding of event studies

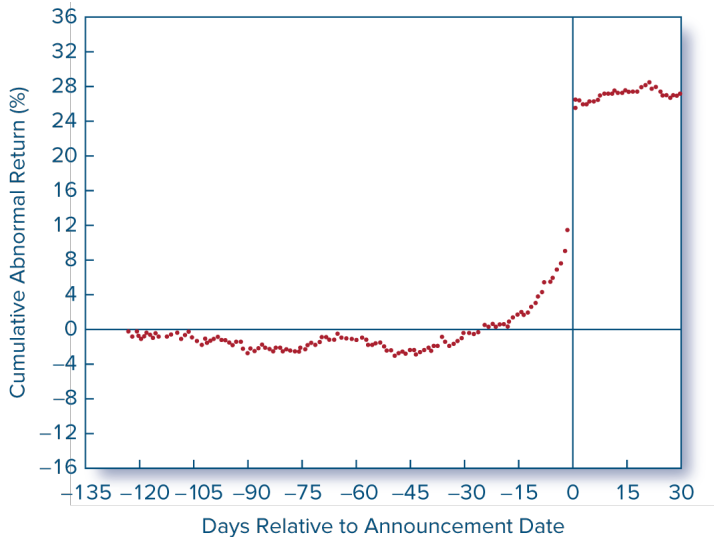


Figure 3: Cumulative abnormal returns before takeover attempts (BKM 2023, Figure 11.1)



# Three issues that keep alive the debate over the EMH

- Magnitude issue
  - Only managers of large portfolios earn enough trading profits to make exploiting minor mispricing worth the effort
  - Still, the increases in performance from their efforts are likely swamped by market volatility
  - “How efficient are markets?” is a better question than “are markets efficient?”
- Selection bias issue
  - Only unsuccessful (or partially successful) investment schemes are made public; good schemes remain private
- Lucky event issue
  - For every big winner, there may be many big losers, but we never hear of these managers
  - There is also the coin toss analogy
    - With 10,000 people flipping a fair coin 50 times each, about 2 investors will flip heads at least 75% of the time
    - It takes a very long time to distinguish skill from luck

# Weak-form tests of EMH

- Returns over *short* horizons
  - The *momentum effect* is the tendency of poorly performing stocks and well-performing stocks in one period to continue that abnormal performance in the following periods
  - Observed for portfolios for 3-month to 12-month holding periods, but not for single stocks
- Returns over *long* horizons
  - The *reversal effect* is the tendency of poorly performing stocks and well-performing stocks in one period to experience *reversals* in the following periods
  - Overreaction followed by correction causes prices to fluctuate around fair value, making market values more volatile than intrinsic values



## There are predictors of broad market returns

- Fama and French (1988) show that the return on the aggregate stock market tends to be higher when the dividend yield is high
- Campbell and Shiller (1988) show that earnings yield can predict market returns
- Keim and Stambaugh (1986) show that bond spreads can help predict broad market returns
- *Bottom line: we can interpret these findings as evidence of predictable abnormal returns or market risk premiums that vary over time*

## Semistrong-form tests of EMH

- Fundamental analysis uses a wider range of information to create portfolios than does technical analysis
- Several easily available pieces of information seem to predict abnormal or risk-adjusted returns
- These findings seem to contradict the EMH and are often called “anomalies”

## The small-firm effect (Banz 1981)

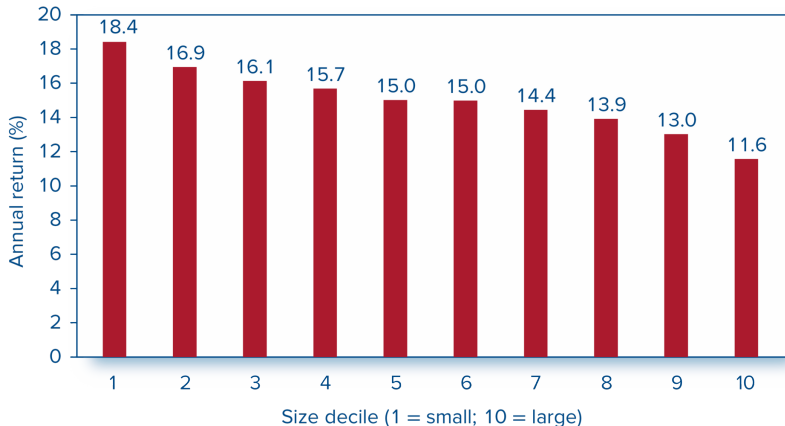


Figure 5: Average annual return for 10 size-based portfolios, 1926–2021 (BKM 2023, Figure 11.4)

## The value-effect (Fama and French 1992)



Figure 6: Average return as a function of book-to-market ratio, 1926–2021 (BKM 2023, Figure 11.5)

# Post-earnings announcement drift (Ball and Brown 1968)

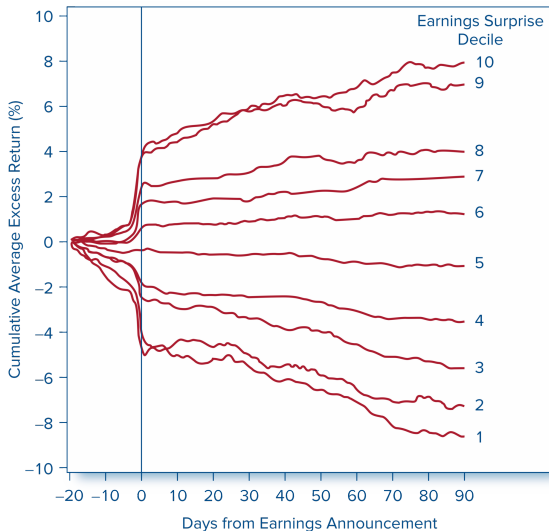


Figure 7: Cumulative abnormal returns in response to earnings announcements (BKM 2023, Figure 11.6)

## Other anomalies

- P/E effect: Portfolios of low-P/E ratio stocks have provided higher returns than high P/E portfolios
- Neglected-firm effect: Investments in stock of less well-known firms have generated abnormal returns
- Liquidity effect: Illiquid stocks have a strong tendency to exhibit abnormally high returns
- Volatility: Negatively associated with returns
- Accruals and earnings quality: High accruals have predicted low future returns
- Growth: More rapidly growing firms (with high capital investments, sales growth, asset growth, or high share issuance) tend to have lower future returns
- Profitability: Gross profitability seems to predict higher stock returns
- $q$ -factor: Tobin's  $q$  is a good predictor of average stock returns



## Strong-form tests of EMH

- We regulate and limit trades based on inside information and do not expect markets to be strong-form efficient
- We have empirical evidence that insiders trade profitably in their stock
- The Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) requires insiders to disclose their trades, making them public information
- However, following these disclosures does not generate abnormal returns large enough to cover transaction costs

## How should we interpret these anomalies?

- The size, value, momentum, and long-term reversal are among the most puzzling empirical findings in finance
- Note that they may all be related because small, value, and loser firms have all had large negative returns recently and may be distressed firms
- These empirical findings have two interpretations:
  - Fama and French argue that time-varying risk premiums explain these findings
  - Lakonishok, Shleifer, and Vishny argue that these findings are evidence of inefficient markets
- Ignoring their interpretation, are these anomalies *real* or data mining?
  - Size, value, and momentum may be real anomalies, as they exist around the world and across asset classes
  - Other anomalies have been less persistent *out-of-sample*, and some senior researchers have called for a higher statistical significance threshold to accept new anomalies
- Over time, anomalies should be self-destructing
  - McLean and Pontiff (2016) find exactly this!
  - They test 97 anomalies and find that

# Are tulip mania, the South Sea Bubble, and the dot-com boom and bust show that prices are arbitrary?

- Probably not, and obvious trading opportunities are not abundant
- Most bubbles are obvious only in retrospect, and price run-ups typically have reasonable explanations
- Security valuation is difficult, and intrinsic value estimates are imprecise
- Even if prices are “wrong”, taking advantage of mispricings can be difficult
  - Short-selling is expensive
  - You may not get the securities you want to sell short
  - Prices can move against you in the short term, wiping out your capital

# Can skilled investors make consistent abnormal trading profits?

- This is the definition of market efficiency we care about!
- We will consider the evidence of
  - Stock market analyst recommendations
  - Mutual fund managers

## Stock market analysts are overwhelmingly positive in their assessments of firms

- Stock market analysts typically work for brokerage firms, so they may be conflicted
- On a scale of 1 (strong buy) to 5 (strong sell), the average recommendation in 1996 was 2.04
- So, we typically focus on *changes* in recommendations instead of levels, and some researchers find that positive changes are associated with price increases and negative changes are associated with price decreases
- However, other researchers find that trading strategies based on recommendations trade heavily and have associated trading costs that wipe out potential profits

# There is little evidence that professionally managed portfolios can consistently beat the market

	Number of top-half performers in year ending June 2019	Percentage of 2019 outperformers that perform in top half of sample in year ending June 2020	Percentage of 2019 outperformers that perform in top half of sample in both year ending June 2020 and year ending June 2021
All domestic equity funds	1,041	71.8	19.0
Large-cap equity funds	373	61.1	25.5
Small-cap equity funds	261	69.4	16.5

Source: Berlinda Liu and Gaurav Sinha, "U.S. Persistence Scorecard, Mid-Year 2021," *S&P Dow Jones Indices*, October 2021.

Figure 8: Consistency of Investments Results (BKM 2023, Table 11.1)



## So, Are Markets Efficient?

- Enough anomalies exist in the empirical evidence to justify the search for underpriced securities that takes place
- However, the market is competitive enough that only differentially superior information or insight will earn money
- Margin of superiority that any professional manager can add is so slight that the statistician will not easily be able to detect it

# Summary from BKM (2023)







1. Statistical research has shown that to a close approximation stock prices seem to follow a random walk with no discernible predictable patterns that investors can exploit. Such findings are now taken to be evidence of market efficiency, that is, evidence that market prices reflect all currently available information. Only new information will move stock prices, and this information is equally likely to be good news or bad news.
2. Market participants distinguish among three forms of the efficient market hypothesis. The weak form asserts that all information to be derived from past trading data already is reflected in stock prices. The semistrong form claims that all publicly available information is already reflected. The strong form, which generally is acknowledged to be extreme, asserts that all information, including insider information, is reflected in prices.
3. Technical analysis focuses on stock price patterns and on proxies for buy or sell pressure in the market. Fundamental analysis focuses on the determinants of the underlying value of the firm, such as current profitability and growth prospects. Because both types of analysis are based on public information, neither should generate excess profits if markets are operating efficiently.
4. Proponents of the efficient market hypothesis often advocate passive as opposed to active investment strategies. Passive investors buy and hold a broad-based market index. They expend resources neither on market research nor on frequent purchase and sale of stocks. Passive strategies may be tailored to meet individual investor requirements.
5. Event studies are used to evaluate the economic impact of events of interest, using abnormal stock returns. Such studies usually show that there is some leakage of inside information to some market participants before the public announcement date. Therefore, insiders do seem to be able to exploit their access to information to at least a limited extent.
6. One notable exception to weak-form market efficiency is the apparent success of momentum-based strategies over intermediate-term horizons.
7. Several anomalies regarding fundamental analysis have been uncovered. These include the value-versus-growth effect, the small-firm effect, the momentum effect, and post-earnings-announcement price drift. Whether these anomalies represent market inefficiency or poorly understood risk premiums is still a matter of debate.
8. By and large, the performance record of professionally managed funds lends little credence to claims that most professionals can consistently beat the market. Superior performance in one period does not generally predict superior performance going forward.








## Key equations from BKM (2023)

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Abnormal return} &= \text{Actual return} - \text{Expected return given the return on a market index} \\ &= r_t - (a + br_{Mt})\end{aligned}$$

# References I

-  Ball, Ray and Philip Brown (1968). “An empirical evaluation of accounting income numbers”. In: *Journal of Accounting Research*, pp. 159–178.
-  Banz, Rolf W. (1981). “The relationship between return and market value of common stocks”. In: *Journal of Financial Economics* 9.1, pp. 3–18.
-  Berk, Jonathan B. and Richard C. Green (2004). “Mutual fund flows and performance in rational markets”. In: *Journal of Political Economy* 112.6, pp. 1269–1295.
-  Bodie, Zvi, Alex Kane, and Allan J. Marcus (2023). *Investments*. 13th ed. New York: McGraw Hill.
-  Campbell, John Y. and Robert J. Shiller (1988). “Stock prices, earnings, and expected dividends”. In: *The Journal of Finance* 43.3, pp. 661–676.
-  Fama, Eugene F. and Kenneth R. French (1988). “Dividend yields and expected stock returns”. In: *Journal of Financial Economics* 22.1, pp. 3–25.

## References II

-  — (1992). “The cross-section of expected stock returns”. In: *The Journal of Finance* 47.2, pp. 427–465.
-  Grossman, Sanford J. and Joseph E. Stiglitz (1980). “On the Impossibility of Informationally Efficient Markets”. In: *The American Economic Review* 70.3, pp. 393–408.
-  Keim, Donald B. and Robert F. Stambaugh (1986). “Predicting returns in the stock and bond markets”. In: *Journal of Financial Economics* 17.2, pp. 357–390.
-  Kendall, Maurice G. (1953). “The Analysis of Economic Time-Series—Part I: Prices”. In: *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (General)* 116.1, pp. 11–25.
-  McLean, R. David and Jeffrey Pontiff (2016). “Does academic research destroy stock return predictability?” In: *The Journal of Finance* 71.1, pp. 5–32.