

Willis Towers Watson(WLTW)

\$227.50 (As of 02/17/21)

Price Target (6-12 Months): **\$244.00**

Long Term: 6-12 Months

Zacks Recommendation:

Neutral

(Since: 11/18/19)

Prior Recommendation: Outperform

Short Term: 1-3 Months

Zacks Rank: (1-5)

3-Hold

Zacks Style Scores:

VGM:C

Value: C

Growth: C

Momentum: D

Summary

Willis Towers is well-poised on incremental revenue growth, cost synergies and solid balance sheet. Focus on realizing operational efficiencies, investment in new growth avenues and strength of its client services bode well. Buyouts help it to penetrate deeper into the markets and expand its international presence. Higher organic commissions and fees, solid customer retention levels and growing new business should help the company to ramp up its revenues. Strong balance sheet and steady cash flows ensure effective capital deployment through share buybacks and dividend payouts. Its shares have outperformed its industry in the past year. However, high costs tend to weigh on margin expansion. Higher debt level and lower interest rate pose financial risks. Also, exposure to foreign exchange volatility and lower return on equity raises financial risks.

Price, Consensus & Surprise

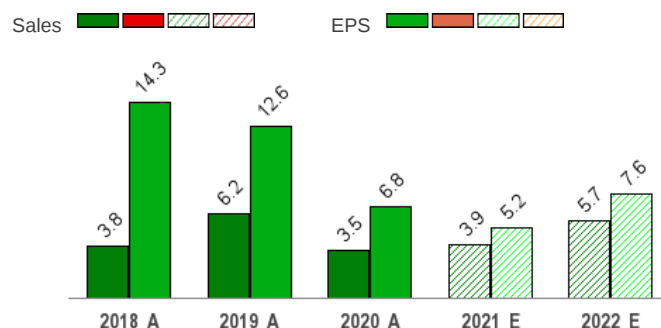


Source: Zacks Investment Research

Data Overview

52-Week High-Low	\$232.34 - \$143.34
20-Day Average Volume (Shares)	899,494
Market Cap	\$29.4 B
Year-To-Date Price Change	8.3%
Beta	0.76
Dividend / Dividend Yield	\$2.84 / 1.2%
Industry	Insurance - Brokerage
Zacks Industry Rank	Bottom 31% (175 out of 253)

Sales and EPS Growth Rates (Y/Y %)



Last EPS Surprise	4.2%
Last Sales Surprise	1.8%
EPS F1 Estimate 4-Week Change	1.0%
Expected Report Date	04/29/2021
Earnings ESP	1.1%
P/E TTM	19.5
P/E F1	18.5
PEG F1	1.7
P/S TTM	3.1

Sales Estimates (millions of \$)

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Annual*
2022	2,623 E	2,292 E	2,194 E	3,093 E	10,272 E
2021	2,507 E	2,183 E	2,089 E	2,926 E	9,720 E
2020	2,466 A	2,113 A	2,009 A	2,764 A	9,352 A

EPS Estimates

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Annual*
2022	\$3.44 E	\$2.05 E	\$1.66 E	\$6.05 E	\$13.25 E
2021	\$3.25 E	\$2.01 E	\$1.71 E	\$5.34 E	\$12.31 E
2020	\$3.34 A	\$1.80 A	\$1.33 A	\$5.23 A	\$11.70 A

*Quarterly figures may not add up to annual.

The data in the charts and tables, including the Zacks Consensus EPS and sales estimates, is as of 02/17/2021. The report's text and the analyst-provided price target are as of 02/18/2021.

Overview

Willis Towers Watson plc, formerly known as Willis Group Holdings plc, is a leading global advisory, broking and solutions company. With the merger of Willis Group and Towers Watson, the merged entity adopted its new name and began trading under the symbol WLTW on the stock exchange in January 2016. However, London, United Kingdom based Willis Towers Watson was formed in 1828.

Willis Towers caters to the need of designs and delivers solutions that manage risk, optimize benefits, and expand capabilities, among others of large companies and mid-market and small businesses across the world.

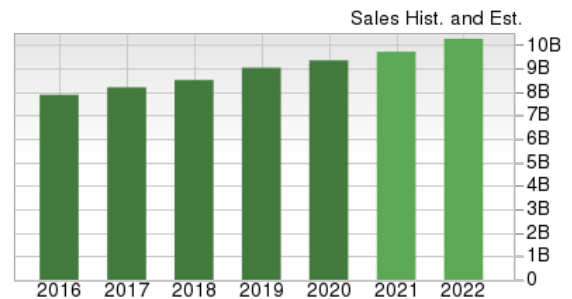
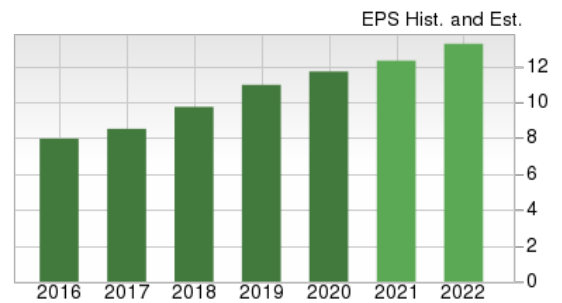
It reports through four operating segments:

Human Capital and Benefits: This segment provides an array of advice, broking, solutions and software for employee benefit plans, the human resources organizations and management teams of its clients.

Corporate Risk and Broking: This segment provides a broad range of risk advice, insurance brokerage and consulting services to clients worldwide ranging from small businesses to multinational corporations. The segment delivers integrated global solutions tailored to meet client needs and underpinned by data and analytics. The segment has placed more than \$20 billion of premium into the insurance markets on an annual basis.

Investment, Risk and Reinsurance: This segment uses a sophisticated approach to risk, which helps clients free up capital and manage investment complexity. The segment works closely with investors, reinsurers and insurers to manage the equation between risk and return. Blending advanced analytics with deep institutional knowledge, the segment identifies new opportunities to maximize performance. The segment provides investment consulting and discretionary management services and insurance specific services and solutions through reserves opinions, software, ratemaking, risk underwriting and reinsurance broking.

Benefits Delivery and Administration: This segment provides primary medical and ancillary benefit exchange and outsourcing services to active employees and retirees across both group and individual markets.



Source: Zacks Investment Research

Reasons To Buy:

- ▲ Shares of Willis Towers have gained 8.5% outperforming the industry's decrease of 2.1% in the past year. Moreover, operational efficiencies, investment in new growth avenues and an effective capital deployment will help the stock to trend higher.
- ▲ Organic growth in commissions and fees, forming the major component of Willis Towers' revenues continues to post positive numbers. Most of the company's operating regions experienced revenue growth for the 11 straight quarters, driving top-line growth. In 2020, the top line exhibited organic growth of 2% year over year. Its geographic diversification supports overall growth. With solid customer retention levels and growing new business, we expect the company to ramp up its revenues.
- ▲ Willis Towers' strategic acquisitions have expanded its geographical footprint in the last few years in countries like Italy, Canada, the U.K. and France as well as ramped up product portfolio. In July 2019, the company acquired TRANZACT to speed up its direct-to-consumer U.S. health care strategy as well as strengthen its profile in the health care space. Willis Towers that was formed with the merger of Willis Group and Towers Watson in Jan 2016 is a testimony of its efforts to pursue strategic opportunities that will ramp up its growth profile by combining forces and leverage strengths. In March 2020, Aon and Willis Towers entered into an agreement to merge in an all-stock deal. The transaction, which is likely to close in the first half of 2021, is anticipated to provide data-driven insights for creating new sources of client value.
- ▲ Willis Towers has been improving its liquidity while maintaining a solid balance sheet. Though the company's current debt was \$971 million as of Dec 31, 2020, cash and cash equivalents totaled \$1.6 billion along with full capacity in undrawn \$1.25 billion revolving credit facility at 2020 end. This suggests that the company has sufficient cash reserves to meet its short-term debt obligations. A strong balance sheet and steady cash flow is expected to help the company engage in capital deployment for buybacks, dividend payouts, debt repayments, acquisitions and investments that drive and support growth. Free cash flow almost doubled to \$1.6 billion in 2020 due to a combination of prudent working capital management and a disciplined approach to managing spends. The company increased its dividend at a four-year CAGR of 10% and returned 3.36 billion in capital to its shareholders in the last five years. However, the company may not repurchase any shares in 2021 given certain provisions in the transaction agreement with Aon. With a solid financial position, the company intends to continue to reward its shareholders, invest in innovation, technology, and new business opportunities, and pursue opportunistic mergers and acquisitions.

Increasing organic commissions and fees, solid customer retention levels, growing new business, strong exchange business, strategic acquisitions and a solid capital position should aid growth.

Reasons To Sell:

- ▼ Willis Towers' expenses have been rising over the last several quarters, resulting in the contraction of margins. In 2020, total expenses increased about 6%, primarily on higher salaries and benefits, other operating expenses, depreciation, transaction and integration expenses. Net margin contracted 90 bps in 2020.
- ▼ Despite a strong balance sheet sound enough to cover short-term debts, Willis Towers has been witnessing increasing levels of long-term debts in the last few years inducing higher interest expense. Debt increased 0.3% at 2020 end while interest expense rose 4.3% in 2020. Further, the company's times interest earned in 2020 contracted 20 bps from 2019. The company must service its debt uninterrupted, else credit worthiness could be dented.
- ▼ The company is exposed to foreign exchange volatility, which is a major concern. In 2020, currency translation reduced consolidated revenues by \$10 million and the bottom line by 1 cent. The primary currencies driving these changes were the Brazilian Real and the Euro.
- ▼ Willis Towers' return on equity of 14.4% is lower than its industry average of 27.6%. Return on equity is a profitability metric that measures how effectively the company is utilizing its shareholders' funds.

Willis Towers' increasing expenses weighing on margin expansion, rising debt level leading to unfavorable leverage ratio, lower interest coverage ratio and adverse forex keeps us on sidelines.

Last Earnings Report

Willis Towers Q4 Earnings & Revenues Top, Rise Y/Y

Willis Towers Watson delivered fourth-quarter 2020 adjusted earnings of \$5.23 per share, which beat the Zacks Consensus Estimate of \$5.02. The bottom line improved 7% year over year.

The company witnessed solid performance of Human Capital and Benefits, Corporate Risk & Broking and Benefits Delivery & Administration, which was offset by softness in Investment, Risk & Reinsurance.

Quarter Ending 12/2020

Report Date	Feb 09, 2021
Sales Surprise	1.82%
EPS Surprise	4.18%
Quarterly EPS	5.23
Annual EPS (TTM)	11.70

Operational Update

Willis Towers Watson posted adjusted consolidated revenues of \$2.7 billion, up 2.8% year over year on a reported basis. Revenues decreased 2% on an organic basis and 1% on a constant currency basis. The top line beat the Zacks Consensus Estimate by 1.8%.

Total cost of providing services increased 8.7% year over year to \$2.2 billion due to higher salaries and benefits, operating expenses, depreciation, amortization, transaction and integration expenses.

Adjusted operating income was \$820 million, up 1.4% year over year. Margin decreased 40 basis points (bps) to 29.7%.

Adjusted EBITDA was \$967 million, up about 4% year over year. Adjusted EBITDA margin was 35%, up 40 basis points (bps).

Quarterly Segment Update

Human Capital & Benefits: Total revenues of \$865 million were flat year over year (down 2% in constant currency and 1% organic basis). On an organic basis, the global impact of COVID-19 negatively impacted demand in the Talent and Rewards business. Though Technology and Administrative Solutions revenues increased, Health and Benefits revenues declined nominally while Retirement revenues were materially flat. Operating margin was 31.3%, reflecting a decrease of 120 bps.

Corporate Risk & Broking: Total revenues of \$888 million increased 1% year over year (down 1% in both constant currency and organic basis). On an organic basis, North America led the segment with new business generation alongside strong renewals. Revenues decreased in Great Britain, Western Europe and International. Operating margin was 12.5% in the quarter under review, up 200 bps.

Investment, Risk & Reinsurance: Total revenues of \$292 million decreased 7% from the prior-year quarter (9% down constant currency and 1% increase organic). On an organic basis, Reinsurance contributed to the growth. Operating margin was 11%, up 190 bps.

Benefits Delivery & Administration: Total revenues of \$693 million improved 16% (up 16% constant currency and 16% increase organic). The increase was driven by Individual Marketplace, primarily by TRANZACT. Operating margin was 50.7%, down 170 bps.

Full-Year Highlights

Full-year 2020 adjusted earnings of \$11.70 per share beat the Zacks Consensus Estimate of \$11.49. The bottom line increased 7% year over year.

Total revenues increased 3% from the year-ago quarter to about \$9.4 billion and beat the Zacks Consensus Estimate of \$9.3 billion.

Financial Update

Cash and cash equivalents of \$2.1 billion at 2020 end more than doubled from the 2019-end level.

Long-term debt decreased 12% to \$4.7 billion at quarter-end from 2019 end.

Shareholders' equity increased 5.4% from the level on Dec 31, 2019 to \$10.9 billion as of Dec 31, 2020.

Cash flow from operations was \$1.8 billion in 2020, up 64% year over year.

Free cash flow almost doubled to \$1.6 billion in 2020.

During 2020, the company did not engage in share repurchase activity.

Valuation

Willis Towers shares are up 13.1% in the last six months period and 8.5% over the trailing 12-month period. Stocks in the Zacks sub-industry and the Zacks Finance sector are up 7.5% and 25.4% in the last six months period, respectively. Over the past year, the Zacks sub-industry and sector are down 2.1% but up 3.6%, respectively.

The S&P 500 index is up 17.5% in the last six months period and 18% in the past year.

The stock is currently trading at 18.71x trailing 12-month book value, which compares to 19.98x for the Zacks sub-industry, 17.03x for the Zacks sector and 22.9x for the S&P 500 index.

Over the past five years, the stock has traded as high as 18.71x and as low as 12.04x, with a 5-year median of 15.75x. Our Neutral recommendation indicates that the stock will perform in-line with the market. Our \$244 price target reflects 19.6x forward 12-month earnings.

The table below shows summary valuation data for WLTW

Valuation Multiples - WLTW					
		Stock	Sub-Industry	Sector	S&P 500
P/E F12M	Current	18.49	19.98	17.03	22.9
	5-Year High	18.71	21.01	17.12	23.8
	5-Year Low	12.04	15.21	11.59	15.3
	5-Year Median	15.75	17.49	14.57	17.84
P/S F12M	Current	3.03	3.5	7.17	4.59
	5-Year High	3.03	3.5	7.17	4.59
	5-Year Low	1.84	1.91	5.02	3.21
	5-Year Median	2.42	2.62	6.12	3.68
P/B TTM	Current	2.71	6.23	3.07	6.7
	5-Year High	3.61	6.85	3.07	6.7
	5-Year Low	1.39	3.61	1.74	3.84
	5-Year Median	2.05	4.8	2.59	4.96

As of 2/17/2021

Source: Zacks Investment Research

Industry Analysis Zacks Industry Rank: Bottom 31% (175 out of 253)



Source: Zacks Investment Research

Top Peers

Company (Ticker)	Rec	Rank
W.R. Berkley Corporation (WRB)	Outperform	2
Arthur J. Gallagher & Co. (AJG)	Neutral	3
Aon plc (AON)	Neutral	3
Brown & Brown, Inc. (BRO)	Neutral	2
Erie Indemnity Company (ERIE)	Neutral	3
Marsh & McLennan Companies, Inc. (MMC)	Neutral	3
Everest Re Group, Ltd. (RE)	Neutral	4
eHealth, Inc. (EHTH)	Underperform	5

The positions listed should not be deemed a recommendation to buy, hold or sell.

Industry Comparison Industry: Insurance - Brokerage				Industry Peers		
	WLTW	X Industry	S&P 500	AJG	AON	ERIE
Zacks Recommendation (Long Term)	Neutral	-	-	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
Zacks Rank (Short Term)	3	-	-	3	3	3
VGM Score	C	-	-	B	C	D
Market Cap	29.40 B	6.63 B	27.78 B	22.80 B	51.92 B	11.84 B
# of Analysts	9	6	13	7	7	1
Dividend Yield	1.25%	0.82%	1.41%	1.53%	0.81%	1.62%
Value Score	C	-	-	C	D	D
Cash/Price	0.07	0.10	0.06	0.16	0.02	0.02
EV/EBITDA	13.69	14.41	14.78	14.41	18.21	27.31
PEG F1	1.73	2.58	2.37	1.98	NA	NA
P/B	2.69	2.80	3.81	3.63	14.49	9.49
P/CF	12.92	14.26	15.45	15.25	19.41	33.99
P/E F1	18.45	21.13	20.87	24.29	20.69	43.72
P/S TTM	3.14	3.20	3.07	3.26	4.69	4.69
Earnings Yield	5.40%	4.74%	4.71%	4.11%	4.83%	2.29%
Debt/Equity	0.43	0.30	0.68	0.68	2.03	0.08
Cash Flow (\$/share)	17.79	3.13	6.70	7.72	11.81	7.55
Growth Score	C	-	-	B	C	B
Historical EPS Growth (3-5 Years)	12.95%	12.47%	9.32%	11.99%	11.53%	14.16%
Projected EPS Growth (F1/F0)	5.19%	7.65%	13.98%	2.63%	11.89%	6.55%
Current Cash Flow Growth	6.35%	6.35%	2.56%	27.08%	-2.60%	13.54%
Historical Cash Flow Growth (3-5 Years)	30.24%	13.46%	7.55%	14.11%	5.24%	12.81%
Current Ratio	1.48	1.72	1.38	1.10	1.73	1.71
Debt/Capital	29.91%	22.79%	41.31%	40.63%	67.02%	7.03%
Net Margin	10.65%	11.07%	10.60%	11.69%	17.79%	11.49%
Return on Equity	14.37%	13.24%	14.86%	16.44%	64.56%	24.73%
Sales/Assets	0.25	0.35	0.51	0.32	0.35	1.23
Projected Sales Growth (F1/F0)	3.93%	6.49%	6.46%	7.89%	3.93%	2.85%
Momentum Score	D	-	-	B	A	D
Daily Price Change	0.78%	-0.49%	-0.05%	-0.01%	0.92%	0.16%
1-Week Price Change	1.57%	1.16%	1.44%	-1.45%	2.16%	1.06%
4-Week Price Change	9.33%	3.74%	1.42%	-1.52%	8.14%	5.76%
12-Week Price Change	9.76%	6.60%	6.38%	1.37%	10.15%	11.61%
52-Week Price Change	8.56%	-5.73%	8.82%	8.16%	-3.47%	58.38%
20-Day Average Volume (Shares)	899,494	114,807	2,013,641	817,336	1,599,091	55,891
EPS F1 Estimate 1-Week Change	0.48%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.24%	0.00%
EPS F1 Estimate 4-Week Change	0.97%	1.50%	0.68%	2.70%	3.58%	0.00%
EPS F1 Estimate 12-Week Change	0.90%	1.91%	1.97%	2.85%	3.74%	0.00%
EPS Q1 Estimate Monthly Change	-0.31%	0.32%	0.27%	-3.60%	4.05%	NA

Source: Zacks Investment Research

Zacks Stock Rating System

We offer two rating systems that take into account investors' holding horizons: Zacks Rank and Zacks Recommendation. Each provides valuable insights into the future profitability of the stock and can be used separately or in combination with each other depending on your investment style.

Zacks Recommendation

The Zacks Recommendation aims to predict performance over the next 6 to 12 months. The foundation for the quantitatively determined Zacks Recommendation is trends in the company's estimate revisions and earnings outlook. The Zacks Recommendation is broken down into 3 Levels; Outperform, Neutral and Underperform. Unlike many Wall Street firms, we maintain a balance between the number of Outperform and Neutral recommendations. Our team of 70 analysts are fully versed in the benefits of earnings estimate revisions and how that is harnessed through the Zacks quantitative rating system. But we have given our analysts the ability to override the Zacks Recommendation for the 1200 stocks that they follow. The reason for the analyst over-rides is that there are often factors such as valuation, industry conditions and management effectiveness that a trained investment professional can spot better than a quantitative model.

Zacks Rank

The Zacks Rank is our short-term rating system that is most effective over the one- to three-month holding horizon. The underlying driver for the quantitatively-determined Zacks Rank is the same as the Zacks Recommendation, and reflects trends in earnings estimate revisions.

Zacks Style Scores

The Zacks Style Score is as a complementary indicator to the Zacks rating system, giving investors a way to focus on the highest rated stocks that best fit their own stock picking preferences.

Academic research has proven that stocks with the best Value, Growth and Momentum characteristics outperform the market. The Zacks Style Scores rate stocks on each of these individual styles and assigns a rating of A, B, C, D and F. We also produce the VGM Score (V for Value, G for Growth and M for Momentum), which combines the weighted average of the individual Style Scores into one score. This is perfectly suited for those who want their stocks to have the best scores across the board.

Value Score	C
Growth Score	C
Momentum Score	D
VGM Score	C

As an investor, you want to buy stocks with the highest probability of success. That means buying stocks with a Zacks Recommendation of Outperform, which also has a Style Score of an A or a B.

Disclosures

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Returns quoted represent past performance which is no guarantee of future results. Investment returns and principal value will fluctuate so that when shares are redeemed, they may be worth more or less than their original cost. Current performance may be higher or lower than the performance shown.

Investing involves risk; principal loss is possible. There is no guarantee that companies that can issue dividends will declare, continue to pay or increase dividends.

Glossary of Terms and Definitions

52-Week High-Low: The range of the highest and lowest prices at which a stock has traded during the past year. This range is determined based on the stock's daily closing price which may differ from the intra-day high or low. Many investors use it as a technical indicator to determine a stock's current value and future price movement. The idea here is that if price breaks out from the 52-week range, in either direction, the momentum may continue in the same direction.

20-Day Average Volume (Shares): The average number of shares of a company traded in a day over the last 20 days. It is a direct indication of a security's overall liquidity. The higher the average daily trading volume, the easier it is to enter or exit the stock at a desired price with more buyers and sellers being available.

Daily Price Change: This is the percentage difference between a trading day's closing price and the prior trading day's closing price. This item is updated at 9 p.m. EST each day.

1-Week Price Change: This is the percentage change in a stock's closing price over the last 5 trading days. This change reflects the collective buying and selling sentiment over the 1-week period.

A strong weekly price increase for the stock, especially when accompanied by increased volume, is an indication of it gaining momentum.

4-Week Price Change: This is the percentage change in a stock's closing price over the last 20 trading days or past 4 weeks. This is a medium-term price change metric and an indication of the stock gaining momentum.

12-Week Price Change: This is the percentage change of a stock's closing price over the last 60 trading days or past 12 weeks. Similar to 4-week price change, this is a medium-term price change metric. It shows whether a stock has been enjoying strong investor demand, or if it has been in consolidation, or distress over this period.

52-Week Price Change: This is the percentage change in a stock's closing price over the last 260 trading days or past 52 weeks. This long-term price change metric is a good reference point for investors. Some investors seek stocks with the best percentage price change over the last 52 weeks, expecting the momentum to continue.

Market Cap: The number of outstanding common shares of a company times its latest price per share. This figure represents a company's size, which indicates various characteristics, including price stability and risk, in which investors could be interested.

Year-To-Date Price Change: Change in a stock's daily closing price in the period of time beginning the first day of the current calendar year through to the previous trading day.

of Analysts: Number of EPS estimates used in calculating the current-quarter consensus. These estimates come from the brokerage analysts tracking this stock. However, the number of such analysts tracking this stock may not match the number of estimates, as all brokerage analysts may not come up with an estimate or provide it to us.

Beta: A measure of risk commonly used to compare the volatility of a stock to the overall market. The S&P 500 Index is the base for calculating beta and carries a value of 1. A stock with beta below 1 is less risky than the market as a whole. And a stock with beta above 1 is riskier.

Dividend: The portion of earnings a company is expected to distribute to its common shareholders in the next 12 months for each share they own. Dividends are usually paid quarterly. Dividend payments reflect positively on a company and help maintain investors' trust. Investors typically find dividend-paying stocks appealing because the dividend adds to any market price appreciation to result in higher return on investment (ROI). Moreover, a steady or increasing dividend payment provides investors a cushion in a down market.

Dividend Yield: The ratio of a company's annual dividend to its share price. The annual dividend used in the ratio is calculated based on the most recent dividend paid by the company. Dividend yield is an estimate of the dividend-only return from a stock in the next 12 months. Since dividend itself doesn't change frequently, dividend yield usually changes with a stock's price movement. As a result, often an unusually high dividend yield is a result of weak stock price.

S&P 500 Index: The Standard & Poor's 500 (S&P 500) Index is an unmanaged group of securities considered to be representative of the stock market in general. It is a market-capitalization-weighted index of stocks of the 500 largest U.S. companies. Each stock's weight in the index is proportionate to its market value.

Industry: One of the 250+ groups that Zacks classifies all stocks into based on the nature of business. These groups are termed as expanded (aka "X") industries and map to their respective (economic) sectors; Zacks has 16 sectors.

Zacks Industry Rank: The Zacks Industry Rank is determined by calculating the average Zacks Rank for all stocks in the industry and then assigning an ordinal rank to it. For example, an industry with an average Zacks Rank of 1.6 is better than an industry with an average Zacks Rank of 2.3. So, the industry with the better average Zacks Rank would get a better Zacks Industry Rank. If an industry has the best average Zacks Rank, it would be considered the top industry (1 out of 250+), which would place it at the top 1% of Zacks-ranked industries. Studies have shown that roughly half of a stock's price movement can be attributed to the industry group it belongs to. In fact, the top 50% of Zacks-ranked industries outperforms the bottom 50% by a factor of more than 2 to 1.

Last EPS Surprise: The percentage deviation of a company's last reported earnings per share from the Zacks Consensus Estimate. Companies with a positive earnings surprise are more likely to surprise again in the future (or miss again if they recently missed).

Last Sales Surprise: The percentage deviation of a company's last reported sales from the Zacks Consensus Estimate.

Expected Report Date: This is an estimated date of a company's next earnings release. The information originated or gathered by Zacks Investment Research from its information providers or publicly available sources is the basis of this estimate.

Earnings ESP: The Zacks Earnings ESP compares the Most Accurate Estimate to the Zacks Consensus Estimate for the yet-to-be reported quarter. The Most Accurate Estimate is the most recent version of the Zacks Consensus EPS Estimate. The idea here is that analysts revising their estimates closer to an earnings release have the latest information, which could potentially be more accurate than what they and others contributing to the consensus had predicted earlier. Thus, a positive or negative Earnings ESP reading theoretically indicates the likely deviation of the actual earnings from the consensus estimate. However, the model's predictive power is significant for positive ESP readings only. A positive Earnings ESP is a strong predictor of an earnings beat, particularly when combined with a Zacks Rank #1 (Strong Buy), #2 (Buy) or #3 (Hold). Our research shows that stocks with this combination produce a positive surprise nearly 70% of the time.

Periods:

TTM: Trailing 12 months. Using TTM figures is an effective way of analyzing the most-recent financial data in an annualized format that helps neutralize the effects of seasonality and other quarter-to-quarter variation.

F1: Current fiscal year. This period is used to analyze the estimates for the ongoing full fiscal year.

F2: Next fiscal year. This period is used to analyze the estimates for the next full fiscal year.

F12M: Forward 12 months. Using F12M figures is an effective way of analyzing the near-term (the following four unreported quarters) estimates in an annualized manner. Instead of typically representing estimates for the full fiscal year, which may not represent the nitty-gritty of each quarter, F12M figures suggest an all-inclusive annualized estimate for the following four quarters. The annualization helps neutralize the potential effects of seasonality and other quarter-to-quarter variations.

P/E Ratio: The price-to-earnings ratio measures a company's current market price per share relative to its earnings per share (EPS). Usually, the trailing-12-month (TTM) EPS, current-fiscal-year (F1) EPS estimate, or forward-12-month (F12M) EPS estimate is used as the denominator. In essence, this ratio shows what the market is willing to pay today for each dollar of EPS. In other words, this ratio gives a sense of what the relative value of the company is at the already reported level of earnings or at a future level of earnings.

It is one of the most widely-used multiples for determining the value of a company and helps comparing its valuation with that of a competitor, the industry group or a benchmark.

PEG Ratio: The price/earnings to growth ratio is a stock's P/E ratio using current fiscal year (F1) EPS estimate divided by its expected EPS growth rate over the coming 3 to 5 years. This ratio essentially determines a stock's value by factoring in the company's expected earnings growth and is thus believed to provide a more complete picture than just the P/E ratio, particularly for faster-growing companies.

P/S Ratio: The price-to-sales ratio is calculated as a company's current price per share divided by trailing 12 months (TTM) sales or revenues per share. This ratio shows what the market is willing to pay today for each dollar of TTM sales per share. The P/S ratio is at times the only valuation metric when the company has yet to become profitable.

Cash/Price Ratio: The cash-to-price ratio or Cash Yield is calculated as cash and marketable securities per share divided by the company's current share price. Like the earnings yield, which shows the anticipated yield (or return) on a stock from earnings for each dollar invested, the cash yield does the same, with cash being the source of return instead of earnings. For example, a cash/price ratio of 0.08 suggests a return of 8% or 8 cents for every \$1 investment.

EV/EBITDA Ratio: The EV/EBITDA ratio, also known as Enterprise Multiple, is calculated as a company's enterprise value (market capitalization + value of total long-term debt + book value of preferred shares - cash and marketable securities) divided by EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization). Usually, trailing-12-month (TTM) or forward-12-month (F12M) EBITDA is used as the denominator.

EV/Sales Ratio: The enterprise value-to-sales ratio is calculated as a company's enterprise value (market capitalization + value of total long-term debt + book value of preferred shares - cash and marketable securities) divided by annual sales. It is an expansion of the P/S valuation, which uses market value instead of enterprise value. The EV/Sales ratio is perceived as more accurate than P/S, in part, because the market capitalization does not take a company's debt into account when valuing it.

EV/CF Ratio: The enterprise value-to-cash flow ratio is calculated as a company's enterprise value (market capitalization + value of total long-term debt + book value of preferred shares - cash and marketable securities) divided by the trailing-12-month (TTM) operating cash flow. It's a measure of how long it would take to buy the entire business if you were able to use all the company's operating cash flow.

The EV/CF ratio is perceived as more accurate than the P/CF ratio, in part, because the market price does not take a company's debt into account when valuing it.

EV/FCF Ratio: The enterprise value-to-free cash flow metric compares a company's enterprise value to its trailing-12-month (TTM) free cash flow (FCF). This metric is very similar to the EV/CF ratio, but is considered a more exact measure owing to the fact that it uses free cash flow, which subtracts capital expenditures (CAPEX) from a company's total operating cash flow, thereby reflecting the actual cash flow available for funding growth activities and payments to shareholders.

P/EBITDA Ratio: The P/EBITDA ratio is calculated as a company's per share market value divided by EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization). This metric is very similar to the EV/EBITDA ratio, but is considered a little less exact measure as it uses market price, which does not take a company's debt into account. However, since EBITDA is often considered a proxy for cash income, the metric is used as a measure of what the market is willing to pay today for each dollar of the company's cash profitability in the trailing 12 months (TTM) or forward 12 months (F12M).

P/B Ratio: The price-to-book ratio is calculated as a company's current price per share divided by its book value (total assets – liabilities – preferred stocks) per share. In short, the book value is how much a company is worth. In other words, it reflects the total value of a company's assets that its common shareholders would receive if it were to be liquidated. So, the P/B ratio indicates whether you're paying higher or lower than what would remain if the company went bankrupt immediately. Investors typically use this metric to determine how a company's stock price stacks up to its intrinsic value.

P/TB Ratio: The price-to-tangible-book value ratio is calculated as a the per share market value of a company divided by the value of its tangible assets (total assets – liabilities – preferred stocks – intangible assets) per share. Tangible book value is the same thing as book value except it excludes the value of intangible assets to get a step closer to the baseline value of the company.

P/CF Ratio: The price-to-cash flow ratio measures a company's per share market price relative to its trailing-12-month (TTM) operating cash flow per share. This metric is used to determine whether a company is undervalued or overvalued relative to another stock, industry or sector. And like the P/E ratio, a lower number is typically considered better from the value perspective.

One of the reasons why P/CF ratio is often preferred over P/E ratio is the fact that operating cash flow adds back non-cash expenses such as depreciation and amortization to net income. This feature helps valuing stocks that have positive cash flow but are not profitable because of large noncash charges.

P/FCF Ratio: The price-to-free cash flow ratio is an extension of P/CF ratio, which uses trailing-12-month (TTM) free cash flow per share instead of operating cash flow per share. This metric is considered a more exact measure than P/CF ratio, as free cash flow subtracts capital expenditures (CAPEX) from a company's total operating cash flow, thereby reflecting the actual cash flow available for funding activities that generate additional revenues.

Earnings Yield: The earnings yield is calculated as current fiscal year (F1) EPS estimate divided by the company's current share price. The ratio, which is the inverse of the P/E ratio, measures the anticipated yield (or return) from earnings for each dollar invested in a stock today.

For example, earnings yield for a stock, which is trading at \$35 and expected to earn \$3 per share in the current fiscal year (F1), would be 0.0857 ($3/35 = 0.0857$) or 8.57%. In other words, for \$1 invested in the stock today, the yield from earnings is anticipated to be 8.57 cents.

Investors most commonly compare the earnings yield of a stock to that of a broad market index (such as the S&P 500) and prevailing interest rates, such as the current 10-year Treasury yield. Since bonds and stocks compete for investors' dollars, stock investors typically demand a higher yield for the extra risk they assume compared to investors of U.S. Treasury-backed securities that offer virtually risk-free returns. This additional return is referred to as the risk premium.

Debt/Equity Ratio: The debt-to-equity ratio is calculated as a company's total liabilities divided by its shareholder equity. This metric is used to gauge a company's financial leverage. In other words, it is a measure of the degree to which a company is financing its operations through debt versus its own funds. The higher the ratio, the higher the risk for shareholders.

However, this ratio is difficult to compare across industry groups where ideal amounts of debt vary. Some businesses are more capital intensive than others and typically require higher debt to finance their operations. So, a company's debt-to-equity ratio should be compared with other companies in the same industry.

Cash Flow (\$/share): Cash flow per share is calculated as operating cash flow (after-tax earnings + depreciation + other non-cash charges) divided by common shares outstanding. It is used by many investors as a measure of a company's financial strength. Since cash flow per share takes into consideration a company's ability to generate cash by adding back non-cash expenses, it is regarded by some as a more accurate measure of a company's financial situation than earnings per share, which could be artificially deflated.

Current Ratio: The current ratio or liquidity ratio is a company's current assets divided by its current liabilities. It measures a company's ability to pay short-term obligations. A current ratio that is in line with the industry average or slightly higher is generally considered acceptable. A current ratio that is lower than the industry average would indicate a higher risk of distress or default. A higher number is usually better. However, a very high current ratio compared to the industry average could be an indication of inefficient use of assets by management.

Debt/Capital Ratio: Debt-to-capital ratio is a company's total debt (interest-bearing debt + both short- and long-term liabilities) divided its total capital (interest-bearing debt + shareholders' equity). It is a measure of a company's financial leverage. All else being equal, the higher the debt-to-capital ratio, the riskier the stock.

However, this ratio can vary widely from industry to industry, the ideal amount of required debt being different. Some businesses are more capital intensive than others and typically require higher debt to finance their operations. So, a company's debt-to-capital ratio should be compared with the same for its industry.

Net Margin: Net margin is calculated as net income divided by sales. It shows how much of each dollar in sales generated by a company translates into profit. For example, if a company's net margin is 15%, its net income is 15 cents for every \$1 of sales it makes.

A change in margin can reflect either a change in business conditions, or a company's cost controls, or both. If a company's expenses are growing faster than sales, its net margin will decline. However, different net margin rates are considered good for different industries, so it's better to compare net margin rates of companies in the same industry group.

Return on Equity: Return on equity (ROE) is calculated as trailing-12-month net income divided by trailing-12-month average shareholder equity (including reinvested earnings). This metric is considered a measure of how effectively management is using a company's assets to generate profits. For example, if a company's ROE is 10%, it creates 10 cents profits for every \$1 shareholder equity, which is basically the company's assets minus debt. A company's ROE deemed good or bad depends on what's normal for its peers or industry group.

Sales/Assets Ratio: The sales-to-assets ratio or asset utilization ratio or asset turnover ratio is calculated as a company's annual sales divided by average assets (average of assets at the beginning of the year and at the year's end). This metric helps investors understand how effectively a company is using its assets to generate sales. For example, a sales-to-assets ratio of 2.5 indicates that the company generated \$2.50 in sales for every \$1 of assets on its books.

The higher the sales-to-assets ratio, the better the company is performing. However, similar to many other ratios, the asset turnover ratio tends to be higher for companies in certain industries/sectors than in others. So, a company's sales-to-assets ratio should be compared with the same for its industry/sector.

Historical EPS Growth (3-5 Years): This is the average annual (trailing-12-month) EPS growth rate over the last 3-5 years. This metric helps investors see how a company's EPS has grown from a long-term perspective.

Note: There are many factors that can influence short-term numbers — a recession will reduce this number, while a recovery will inflate it. The longterm perspective helps smooth out short-term events.

Projected EPS Growth (F1/F0): This is the estimated EPS growth rate for the current financial year. It is calculated as the consensus estimate for the current fiscal year (F1) divided by the reported EPS for the last completed fiscal year (F0).

Current Cash Flow Growth: It measures the latest year-over-year change in operating cash flow. Cash flow growth tells an investor how quickly a company is generating inflows of cash from operations. A positive change in the cash flow is desired and shows that more 'cash' is coming in than going out.

Historical Cash Flow Growth (3-5 Years): This is the annualized change in cash flow over the last 3-5 years. The change in a longer period helps put the current reading into proper perspective. By looking at the rate, rather than the actual dollar value, the comparison across the industry and peers becomes easier.

Projected Sales Growth (F1/F0): This metric looks at the estimated sales growth for the current year. It is calculated as sales estimate for the current fiscal year (F1) divided by the reported sales for the last completed fiscal year (F0).

Like EPS growth, a higher rate is better for sales growth. A look at a company's projected sales growth instantly tells you what the outlook is for their products and services. However, different sales growth rates are considered good for different industries, so it's better to compare sales growth rates of companies in the same industry group.

EPS F1 Estimate 1-Week Change: The percentage change in the Zacks Consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal year over the past week. The change in a company's consensus EPS estimate (or earnings estimate revision) has proven to be strongly correlated with the near-term price movement of its shares. It is an integral part of the Zacks Rank.

If a stock's consensus EPS estimate is \$1.10 now versus \$1.00 a week ago, that will be reflected as a 10% upward revision. If, on the other hand, it went from \$1.00 to 90 cents, that would be a 10% downward revision.

EPS F1 Estimate 4-Week Change: The percentage change in the Zacks Consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal year over the past four weeks.

A stock's earnings estimate revision in a 1-week period is important. But it's more meaningful to look at the longer-term revision. And, of course, the 4-week change helps put the 1-week change into proper perspective.

EPS F1 Estimate 12-Week Change: The percentage change in the Zacks Consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal year over the past 12 weeks.

This metric essentially shows how the consensus EPS estimate has changed over a period longer than 1 week or 4 weeks.

EPS Q1 Estimate Monthly Change: The percentage change in the Zacks Consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal quarter over the past four weeks.

While the revision in consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal year is strongly correlated with the near-term price movement of its shares, the estimate revision for the current fiscal quarter is an important metric as well, especially over the short term, and particularly as a stock approaches its earnings date. If a stock's Q1 EPS estimate decreases ahead of its earnings release, it's usually a negative sign, whereas an increase is a positive sign.