

1 | How Long Will It Take?

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If I had a dollar for every time someone asked me, “How long will this process take?” I might not need to work at all! In all seriousness, however, this question is almost impossible to answer definitively. My response is usually “It depends.” Indeed, it *does* depend on four factors that I’ll describe in detail in the pages to come. I’ve always found it fascinating that someone can call and inquire about our services, explain in great detail the extent of the work that needs to be done and how long they’ve been working that way—and then expect what our specialists have termed the “four-hour miracle.” If this work could truly be completed in a mere four hours, I can guarantee you that the individual would’ve already taken the steps to create these systems and would now be using these processes on a daily basis. But of course, it just doesn’t work this way.

Just as I was preparing to write this book, I gave a talk to a roomful of women business owners. The topic touched a bit on time management, paper and information management, and several Outlook® tips that I guaranteed the attendees would save them time on a daily basis. A few days after this seminar, one of the participants e-mailed me and inquired as to how I could help her with her paper and information management systems in her office. She was embarrassed that she had let her office go, with stacks of paper and information everywhere. Since she was only a few weeks away from bringing some new employees on board, she decided she needed to set a good example in the hopes that her employees might also implement these systems—and start being productive right out of the gate. I listened for quite some time as she discussed her needs, past challenges, and how she was thirsty for change but lacked the knowledge and ability to do this on her own. My team and I identified her priorities: to begin with paper management systems and then move on to electronic information at a later date. As we continued to discuss her project in some detail, I began to visualize what I would see when I met with her a couple of weeks later. This time, my new client did not ask me how long her project would take; instead, she told me: one day. I was rather surprised to hear that estimate from someone who had claimed to have never had a good paper management system and

never filed anything. I was even more surprised that she thought we'd still have time left at the end of the day for me to answer her Outlook questions.

When our conversation ended, I prepared several documents and e-mailed them to her in preparation for our first meeting. Shortly after I sent the e-mail, I received a reply informing me that creating the paper filing structure, sorting all of her papers, and getting everything filed would take us just three hours. Perfect, I thought to myself, another individual expecting the nonexistent four-hour miracle.

Part of me wanted to ask my client why she wanted our expertise when she was now telling me how to do my job and how long it would take. I wondered how she would react if one of her clients told her how long it was going to take for her to write a comprehensive estate plan.

We all have our area of expertise. The most important thing is to do what you are good at and then delegate the rest or hire experts to help you with specific projects. For example, I am not particularly good at graphic design. I see the value of hiring a designer who understands my business and can work with me to create the image we desire to portray. I would never attempt to do this on my own; furthermore, I would be embarrassed to tell my designer how long it will take him to design my new website template or create business cards, stationery, and other marketing material. Rather, I trust that we will collaborate on the project to reach the desired outcome I've hired him for.

The bottom line is this: When you decide that you need to get organized, work more efficiently, and eliminate the chaos at work, you must understand that it's a process, not an event. Don't set yourself up for failure by thinking you can solve all of your problems in four hours—or even a single day. I don't want you to be disappointed, so while this is certainly doable, you need to shift your thinking somewhat. After all, consider how long your office has been like this or how long you've done things a certain way, and allow enough time to change old habits, implement new systems, and use them regularly to ensure they are working. In the end, you're creating a new work-style. This work-style is a conscious choice you make to use daily.

As you begin to work on your projects, here are the four factors that will help you determine how long your project will take:

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1. **How much time you are willing to commit to working on this project on a daily or weekly basis.** Let's face it; it's going to be a challenge to make the time during your day for this project. The key phrase here is *make the time*. You will never find the time for this project; you must purposefully incorporate it into your schedule. It will be more time-consuming when you start, but once you've designed and implemented your new systems, you will move on to the maintenance phase—which will become part of your work-style.
2. **How focused you are on the task at hand.** Losing focus to check e-mail, answer the phone, have a conversation with a coworker, or leave the project area to put something in another part of the office will require additional time for you to pull your focus back to the task at hand.
3. **How large the project is.** Maybe you have 60 bankers' boxes of documents that must be sorted, organized, and some placed into archives with the rest filed into a newly created filing system. Or perhaps you have six filing cabinets with four drawers each, full of documents you've never looked at and know you need to cull but can't do so without spending time looking at each client file. Maybe you have just a couple of desk drawers of project files that you need a better system for. Can you see how different each of these three paper projects is? Until you can identify the scope of the individual project, it will be a challenge to determine the amount of time necessary to complete the task.
4. **How quickly you make decisions.** The ability to make quick decisions will have a tremendous impact on how long your project will take. Disorganization and clutter—whether visual, electronic, or mental clutter—are all the result of delayed decisions.

Now that you understand the four factors that determine the length of the project, you are one step closer to answering the question: "How long will it take?" Only *you* can answer this question, unless, of course, you hire a professional to work with you to accomplish your goals.

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