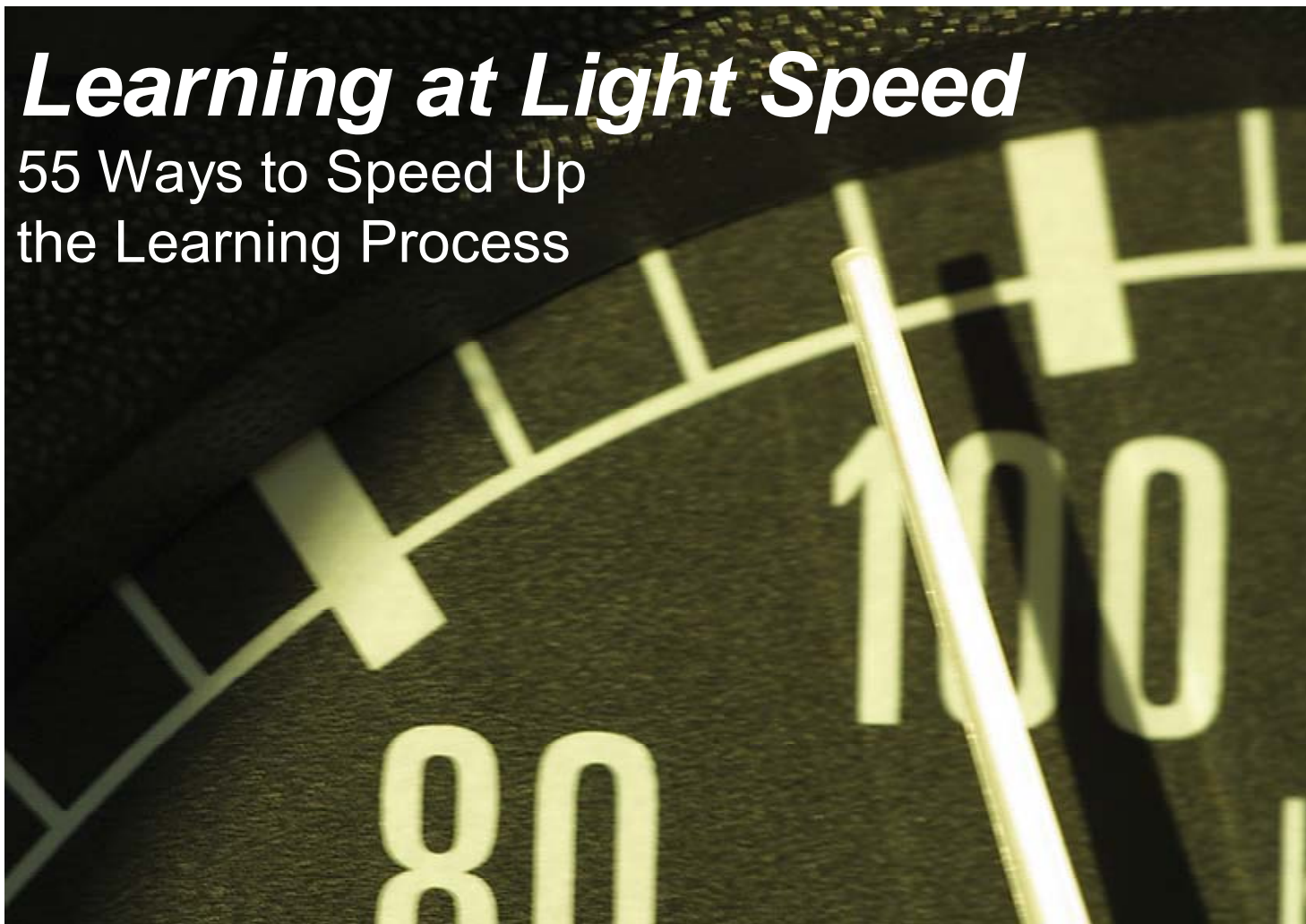


Learning at Light Speed

55 Ways to Speed Up
the Learning Process



*A Whitepaper by
Steven C. Rosenbaum
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Speed is Critical!

Summary

The longer it takes employees to get up to speed has a direct and measurable effect on productivity, quality, customer satisfaction, morale and safety. Learning quickly goes beyond just knowledge acquisition. Learning in the corporate world requires being able to use new knowledge and skill on the job. When you think about accelerated learning, think about it as become fully proficient faster.

This whitepaper covers a range of ideas, tips and techniques for accelerating the learning process in the classroom and on the job.

1. Experiment

One of the important things we learn from the quality movement is the importance of experiments. If you know how long something takes, you can set up experiments to see if an approach to learning is faster or not. If you test a reading assignment versus a lecture or a game or elearning, you can see which one actually effects learning speed the most. Other experiments might involve looking at the amount and timing of practice or the effects of different types of feedback. The big point is that if you want to speed up learning, you need to know how much time it takes now and then experiment to make things faster.

2. Eliminate Waste

One of the key activities in improving quality is to eliminate waste. You may have been part of a Kaizen event that did this. Waste can be anything that isn't necessary and in particular, in speeding up learning, you're looking for things that are a waste of time.

Where is the waste in education and training? One major source of waste is everything that is taught one day and forgotten the next. Think about your K-12 years and even your college years. How much were you taught that you no longer remember? For most people it's a staggering amount. Speeding up learning requires looking at each course or training event and looking at the retention rate. If it's low, you need to toss it out or try something else.

3. Minimize Trial and Error Learning

It's true we do learn most of what we know from experience. However, we tend to learn a mixture of the right way and wrong way to do things. I misspent a lot of my youth skating down at the lake. What you saw was a lot of different skating styles and different levels of success learning to skate. You also see some good skaters who have overcome bad technique to be able to skate really fast. Now image that instead of everyone learning to skate by trial and error, they had some early instruction and disciplined practice.



What you'd see is that almost everyone was skating with good form and probably learned how to skate well very quickly. What you'd also notice is that the best skaters would look like they were skating effortlessly rather than the self-taught skater who learned to skate fast but with arms and legs flailing everywhere.

From a learner's standpoint, it's critical to be able to learn from others. It's also accepting the some techniques are better than others and that you don't have to make every mistake yourself before you learn.

4. Tell a Story

Storytelling is a much more powerful way of teaching and learning than straight lecture or reading. It's effective for two key reasons. First, it provides a structure that is easier to remember than straight delivery of facts and information. Second, it provides a unique context for the new information that adds heavily to understanding.

5. Teach to Learn

Sitting in a lecture or watching a video or even reading text from an elearning screen is a fairly passive activity. They are one way information dumps. It's like turning on the fire hose and asking you to drink. You'll get something from it but your retention rate will be very low.

Now let's reverse the situation and now you're in front of the class. There are two things that make this a really valuable and intense learning experience. First, students have to organize the information and their thoughts so others will understand. As they do this, they increase their understanding. Second, there's a big difference between what's in your head and what happens when you try to say it.

6. Focus on Speed

This may seem odd as a suggestion but the longer it takes to learn something the harder it is to keep the learner motivated. Looking for ways to increase speed actually will increase speed. As you set up a measurement system for training, try adding a speed measure such as time to proficiency.

55 Ways to Speed Up the Learning Process

7. Remove Topic Silos

Math, history, geography, team building, sales, political science and dozens more are popularly taught topics or subjects. If you asked the question, why is education divided into these topics, the answer is probably... it's seems logical, it's one way to divide up everything, or it allows teachers to specialize, or I don't really know.

These are silos of knowledge and skill. In the academic world, it makes sense to separate them because it's easier to teach. However, in the real world things aren't separated like this. What's missing is all the connections and links between topics which makes them easier to actually use. A faster way to learn is to forget about topics and start to think about outcomes or what you want to be able to do. Then work backwards across topics and subject areas to come up with a better curriculum.

8. Teach the Way You Learn

There is usually a big difference in the way people are taught versus how they actually learn something. When you think about being taught, you usually think about someone telling or showing you something. When you think about how you learn, you usually think about a discovery you made or the hours of practice you invested.

Teaching the way people learn often means setting up learning experiences where others will discover what they need to learn. You'll find these experiences by asking top performers how they learned something and often, they will tell you about these experiences. This also means setting up enough structured practice to ensure that learners get enough repetition to make things stick.

9. Know Your Learning Style

We all learn in slightly different ways. Knowing your own style or the style of your students and adapting really speeds up learning. Some people will tell you that they need to write things down before they learn them while others have to try things out before they start to learn. Some people learn really well from seeing a demonstration on a video while others simply won't get what you're trying to do.

As a teacher, it's hard to adapt everything individually. The answer is to use multiple methods of teaching and experimenting to see what works best. As a student, it's to your advantage to pay attention to how you like to learn and then seek out that type of instruction.

10. Deal with Beliefs First

Adults usually have a strong belief about everything. These beliefs often stand in the way of learning something new. Discussing and challenging these beliefs in a positive way, clears the ground for new ideas to be planted. Start by asking students, "What do you believe is true about..." It really works.

11. Teach in Short Segments

People tend to remember the first and last parts of any lesson. With short segments, you have more firsts and lasts. Once things go beyond about 30 minutes, you're starting to lose effectiveness.

12. Blend Hard and Soft Skills

In most organizations hard (technical) skills and soft (people) skills are taught separately. This is because experts in area aren't the same. That's why engineers get a bad rap about their people skills. However, on the job, employees need to be able to use all these skills at the same time. Teaching them separately doesn't mean students will ever be able to use them together. A better and faster approach is to teach them together in the way they are used on the job.

13. Skip Knowledge Tests

In the workplace you often see a difference between test scores and performance on the job. Many people think this is due to test anxiety or poor study habits. However, that doesn't explain why people who do well on tests often don't do well on the job. That's because the job isn't to recall knowledge. Even in a job like an answer line, the job is more complex and involves doing several things at the same time. For the answer line, besides knowing the answer, the employee also needs to ask good questions, interact positively with the customer, use the computer and the phone system. Therefore, you can cut classroom time by eliminating knowledge tests and get a better idea of what someone has learned through direct observation and feedback.

14. Avoid Sink or Swim

Throwing students into the deep end works well for the swimmers. However, it's really hard on the sinkers. In fact, there are usually a lot more sinkers than swimmers. This is a very popular method for a lot of sales forces. The training consists of here's your desk, here's your phone, go to it. When you think about the cost of hiring people, this is a very expensive way of doing things.



55 Ways to Speed Up the Learning Process

15. Add More Reality

The great philosopher Mike Tyson once said, "Everybody's got a plan until they get hit." All the role plays, simulations and practice can go out the window when an employee faces the reality of the job. Take a customer service rep who learns how to deal with problems in the classroom and then faces a really angry customer. To speed up learning, it's critical to build in these real situations.

16. Add More Reality Sooner

Adding more reality is a great idea, but how soon should you go live? The answer is, as soon as possible. You can start by having students observe reality and then have them try out easier less complicated parts of the task or job.

One thing this helps with is helping students decide if this is something they really want to do by clarifying any misunderstanding about the daily routine and requirements.

17. Don't Forget the Big Picture

All too often education is presented in pieces and parts. Everything is done as building blocks toward something that is larger. However, it's harder to learn without knowing the big picture and how things really go together. Think about how much faster it is to complete a jigsaw puzzle when you know what it's suppose to look like when you're done.

18. Play a Game

Learning doesn't have to be dull and boring. In fact, playing games is not only fun, they can also help integrate a range of skills and knowledge together. Games also make it easier to spend the hours and hours of practice required to master many skills. Games that simulate real situations are often the most effective.

19. Find a Mentor

There's no reason you have to figure everything out on your own. That's really the slowness of trial and error learning. In many cases, mentors have already made all the mistakes and can help a student avoid them.

Even just skipping one or two of the most time consuming and costly mistakes can really speed up the learning process. A good mentor can also help structure experiences so that students learn what they need to learn quickly. Finally, being a mentor is another way to improve your own knowledge and understanding. It's part of teaching to learn.

20. Think Quantity Before Quality

Building classroom, online or self-study courses can be very expensive and time consuming. There is usually a trade off between more courses or better looking courses. Unless all the bells and whistles speed up learning, it's better to look at getting more done than making things look pretty



21. Focus on 100%

80%, 90% and certainly 95% are good test scores. However, that's a lot of errors and mistakes on the job. For example, you wouldn't stay in business long if you got 80% of your orders right. Also, that's only one test. In addition what you don't get right on one test accumulates test after test. Just image the sheer number of question a student got wrong from K-12 if they missed 10% on every test. Instead, it's important to focus on a 100% and to keep working toward mastery. It's also good to make sure the tests are accurate and students are simply missing the trick questions or ones the instructor got wrong.

22. Practice Speed

An important part of being fully up-to-speed is being fluent and confident. It's one thing to be able to answer questions on a sale call if given enough time and another thing to be able to provide answers quickly because you really know them. One of the best ways to develop this level of competency is to practice with the clock ticking. See how many answers you can get in 60 seconds. As you practice, you will get better and better, and any test will seem easy.

23. Try Speed Reading

Speed reading is one of many fast learning tools that make everything easier. Most people learn to read by sounding out words either out loud or in their head. As they get better at reading, they recognize whole words or even phrases. Speed reading on the other hand uses visual learning to see whole sentences and paragraphs without sounding out the words. Since you can see much faster than you can speak, speed reading can easily double or triple reading speeds. This helps you read more information faster or to reread something in the time you could read it once. Speed reading in many cases can also improve comprehension. Speed reading requires a lot of practice which is something few people work at in the traditional way of reading.

24. Don't Talk So Much

Often, the more your talk the less learning is happening. Others often have to say the words to learn something and they can't do that when you're talking.

55 Ways to Speed Up the Learning Process

25. Add a Little Music

All the research shows that music improves verbal memory. This means adding music to education but also studying and playing music.

26. Build a Wiki

As you start any new job or new learning environment, you are bombarded with new words and acronyms. Sometimes you'll find a written glossary or list of terms but it's usually out-of-date and hard to find. Terms and acronyms are easy to load to a Wiki which is like an online encyclopedia. The advantage of a Wiki is that it's easy to update and everyone has access to add or modify information rather than waiting for periodic updating.

27. Don't Forget Memory Techniques

Most people remember things through repetition. There are dozens of other techniques that speed up the memory process by linking and rearranging things to make them easier to remember. For example, it's easier to remember the words to a song than a poem.

Putting words to music is just one memory technique. In building courses, a lot of the time you can build in information delivery in a way that's easier to remember. Often a model or map can be used to organize information in a way that helps visual learners.

28. Reduce Variability

Reducing variability is a key element along with reducing the time of any quality improvement effort. This really comes into play in larger organizations and school systems which tend to have a very high degree of variability. For example, in a Fortune 1000 company it's very likely that every division has a different basic sales training course. In fact, they will have multiple instructors teaching the course their own way.

In a school system, something like 4th grade history is different in every school and even between teachers in the same school. As a result, there is little or no sharing of best practices and most students can't get the very best because the best can only teach so many students. Training and education will get better and faster as hundreds and even thousands of different processes are limited to a smaller number that can be worked on and improved.

29. Make a List of Everything

Actually this list of ideas is a good example. As an expert you might know everything on this list but if you were to tell it to someone else, it's likely you would miss a few things. That's what often happens in teaching a job or task. You can do a great job of teaching everything you remember but miss a few things. That five or ten percent often is critical in reaching proficiency. A good list in a lot of environments is a list of everything that can go wrong and what to do about it. A good place for the list is on a Wiki.

30. Become a Speed Researcher

While speed reading and working on memory techniques are great, a third part of the equation is to become a faster researcher. The first thing to do to become a speed research is to learn how to use online search engines. In most cases, this just takes practice and a willingness to try out all the different search functions. The second thing is to search out and bookmark important sites that tend to have the knowledge you seek. Asking others for great sites is part of this search. To help others this involves creating Wikis and online help that's easy to use, up-to-date and complete. A good knowledge management system is crucial.

31. Try Just-in-Time

Not all education and training has to be prepared in advance. An excellent way to learn quickly is to have students build training as they learn. For example, you set up a series of interviews with subject matter experts. The students document what they learn and reshape it into a way they could teach others. This could also include tape recording or video taping the experts.



32. Ask How Not Just What

Most people go to experts to find out what they know. Companies look at top performers to see what they do that's different than average performers. This is good and useful information. However, the key question that most fail to ask is "How did you learn that?" For example, there is a big difference in the questions, "What do you do to get in to see a high level decision maker" versus "How did you learn to get in to see these decision makers?" What you find in the answers are the key experiences and critical events that made the difference. You also see the mistakes that can be avoided by someone new.

33. Capture Expertise Before It's Too Late

There's a tremendous amount of knowledge held by soon to retire baby boomers. Finding ways to capture this knowledge can prevent the next generation from having to figure everything out by trial and error. In addition to making small videos, you can also capture expertise by audio recordings of interviews with these individuals. Even better, record them on the computer and allow voice recognition software to also give you a real time transcript. Remember it's faster to learn from experts than to have to figure everything out for yourself.

55 Ways to Speed Up the Learning Process

34. Find a Buddy

Buddies are different than mentors. A buddy is someone who is going through the same learning experience you are and who wants you to succeed. Sharing experiences and teaching each other helps both you and your buddy learn faster. You just have to check what you're doing with your mentor so you aren't just sharing bad habits.

35. Build a peer network

This is very similar to having a buddy. However, being able to share ideas with peers provides a greater knowledge and experience base. Discussion boards, blogs and even text messages are a great way to build a peer network. You can also look at the wide array of social networking sites to expand your peer network around the world.

36. Listen to Audio Books

Hearing rather than reading a book can improve comprehension and lead to deeper understanding. With a great reader, listening to a book or lesson gains the power of story telling. When looking for audio books, the best readers are actors and singers. Also, if you're an auditory learner, this may be the easiest and fastest way to learn.

37. Practice, Practice, Practice

There really is no substitute for practice. The more you practice the easier things get and the faster you learn. Practicing with a purpose and practicing with good feedback from a coach will also speed up learning. You always want to be sure that you're not practicing bad habits and good structured practice with a coach really helps.

38. Think of Learning as a Process, Not an Event

Learning takes time. It's a process that includes formal and informal education, practice and experience. When you think of learning as a process, you can then apply all of the quality tools and processes to reduce time and variability. If you think of learning as an event such as a class or even a curriculum, you can easily be missing 90% of the learning process. As a result, speeding up learning is less about gaining knowledge faster and more about become proficient and beyond.



39. Take a Quick Trip to the Magic Shop

A quick magic trick is actually an interesting way to make a key point or overcome preconceived ideas that stand in the way of learning. There are lots of magic tricks that take little or no practice but look fairly spectacular. I did this once during sales training. I wanted to make the point that all the tricks and techniques of sales only work if the other person doesn't know the trick. And with today's buyers most already know all the tricks.

So I went to the magic store and the guy behind the counter was very helpful. He showed me several tricks that might work. What I picked was a trick where you passed a 19" needle through a balloon without breaking it. I liked the trick because you could see it from distance. I then showed the class how the trick worked and asked, "Would you like to see it again?" I did it second time and then asked, "Who would like to see it again?" Fewer hands went up. After the third time, no one wanted to see it again. I then drew the connection between how they now felt about the trick with sales tricks and then ask them how they would feel the next time someone wanted to show them the trick. Most major cities have at least one magic shop.

40. Don't Stuff the Goose

Stuffing the Goose is a technical education term. What it refers to is two situations. First, it means adding as much or more content as you possibly can. You don't want to leave anything out. When you review the design, everyone wants to add things until you have no time to actually work on anything. Second, it happens when you bring people in for something like three days. The thinking is, "since we have you here, let's cover everything." How can we put two weeks of content into one week? This is a natural tendency. It's hard to fight. But some of the worst education and training has been stuffed. So focus on your objectives and tell others to stop stuffing the goose.

41. Teach from Simple to Complex

The best alternative to teach topic by topic is to teach by task or outcome. Once you have a list of all the task or outcomes you want to teach, put them in order from simple to complex or easy to hard. Now teach them one by one. Then require a set level of proficiency before moving on. This builds the integration of skills and knowledge plus allowing you to add in real life practice.

42. Change Perspectives

Seeing things from your own point of view is very limiting. You see only a part of the picture. Activities that require students to see things from other people's point of view give deeper understanding. Something as simple as a debate where you take one side and then the other gives works well. Playing the role of a customer or supplier works too. Then have students stand back and look at the big picture to see how everyone relates and interacts

55 Ways to Speed Up the Learning Process

43. Build a Show Me How Library

This is actually a really easy one. List out the major tasks you want others to learn. Now take your digital camcorder and make short movies of an expert doing each task. To make production easy have another expert describe what the other person is doing. Take all these small digital videos and either put them up on a menu driven DVD or post them online with a help menu. In only hours, you have a really valuable show me how library. Since their digital, they're easily replaced as things change. This method is great for both visual and digital learners. Use Case Studies

Analysis is a higher level learning skill. It shows a much higher level of competence than being able to repeat facts or even describe what was read. Case studies require students to analyze what happened and why. Case studies can also incorporate a range of knowledge and experience which again breaks down the topic silos.

44. Leave a Trail for Others

You can help others learn what you're about to learn by keeping a learning diary which includes your insights including both right and wrong turns. These are valuable for future students but also for teachers who need to build training for others.

45. Build a Blog

Blogs are easy to maintain and update ways to share information and get a discussion going. Because blogs don't have a formal structure, they are extremely flexible. You can use them to post articles, videos and other research. Learning from each other is faster than learning on your own.

46. Race to Proficiency

The goal of learning should be to reach a desired goal or outcome. A class or even a curriculum is usually not enough to reach that goal. Structuring what happens after the class is over completes the training. Otherwise, there is a lot of slow wandering around after training or the student just gives up.

47. Add Structure to Experiences

Experience puts all of the learning together. Even a lot of repetition over time speeds up performance. However, not all experience is worthwhile or necessary. A faster way to learn is to structure experience so the student encounters all the right stuff in the right order. Having a good list of problems to expect helps build structured experience. Also learning by discovery is really powerful. So structure experiences so that this discovery happens.

48. Use Math Magic

Math magic is a lot like speed reading and memory techniques. Experts have figured out a faster way to do a range of calculations that can often beat a calculator. Learning them actually creates a greater understanding of numbers and how they go together. Adding speed to your capabilities adds speed to your learning.

49. Learn to Thrive on Chaos

Change isn't usually neat and clean. Change can be a very chaotic event. But out of this chaos comes a lot of creativity. A little chaos in the learning process forces students to react and try to regain their balance. If everything is too safe, it's hard to learn something new.

50. Write Case Studies

Having students build their own case studies is a more advanced learning activity because it goes beyond simple analysis to being able to synthesize ideas and facts into something new. Presenting this case study to the class becomes a teaching experience for students.

51. Try Voice Recognition Software

Voice recognition software is getting better and better every day. It allows you to quickly put your thoughts into writing. It helps build text based materials in an easy to read narrative style. Recording information from experts makes the journey to self-study and elearning a lot shorter.

52. Have Fun

Learning doesn't have to be boring. Adding a little fun keeps morale up and helps students over rough patches. Games, contests, music, video and more help keep students engaged.

53. Build Templates and Standard Formats

If you need to develop a lot of education or training quickly, the first step is to pre-make a lot of decisions that would normally be made at the start of every new program. This means building standard formats and templates for things like, teacher materials, self-study assignments, elearning and more. Believe me, it will save a lot of time if you don't have to pick type styles and sizes every time you create a document. Also it allows others who are less experienced to quickly build their own courses.

54. Know What You Know

Putting everyone through the same learning process is too fast for some and too slow for others. A good up front assessment can help a teacher customize any learning process. In a workplace where you will have a wide range of capabilities and experiences this is especially critical.

55. Use Case Studies

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About LPI

Learning Paths International is a performance improvement consulting firm with partners in the U.S., Canada, U.K. and Europe. In addition to the Learning Path Methodology, LPI also offers a wide range of consulting and learning development services including: strategic planning, change management and leadership development

Learning Paths International

Steven Rosenbaum, President
1373 White Oak Drive
Chaska, MN 55318
952 368 9329
infoUS@learningpathsinternational.com

Performance Builders, Inc.

Ira Kasdan, President
18101 Tamarack Drive
Minnetonka, MN 55345
952-401-1016 Office
612-310-4438 Cell
lkasdan@comcast.net

Learning Paths Europe

The Sales Architects
Merchant West
274 Bath Street
Glasgow G2 4JR
Tel: (+44) 141 332 8855
infoUK@learningpathsinternational.com

Learning Paths International Canada

Arupa Tesolin
11 John St. S., Suite 102
Tel: 905 271 7272
Mississauga, Ontario
L5H 2E3
infoCAN@learningpathsinternational.com