

18F Folks: Adopting a new illustration library

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Serving America's diverse population is central to 18F's mission. To help us further this effort, we've adopted a new illustration style to capture a broad spectrum of human experiences.

Previously, we used Pablo Stanley's [Avataaars](#) library to represent people.

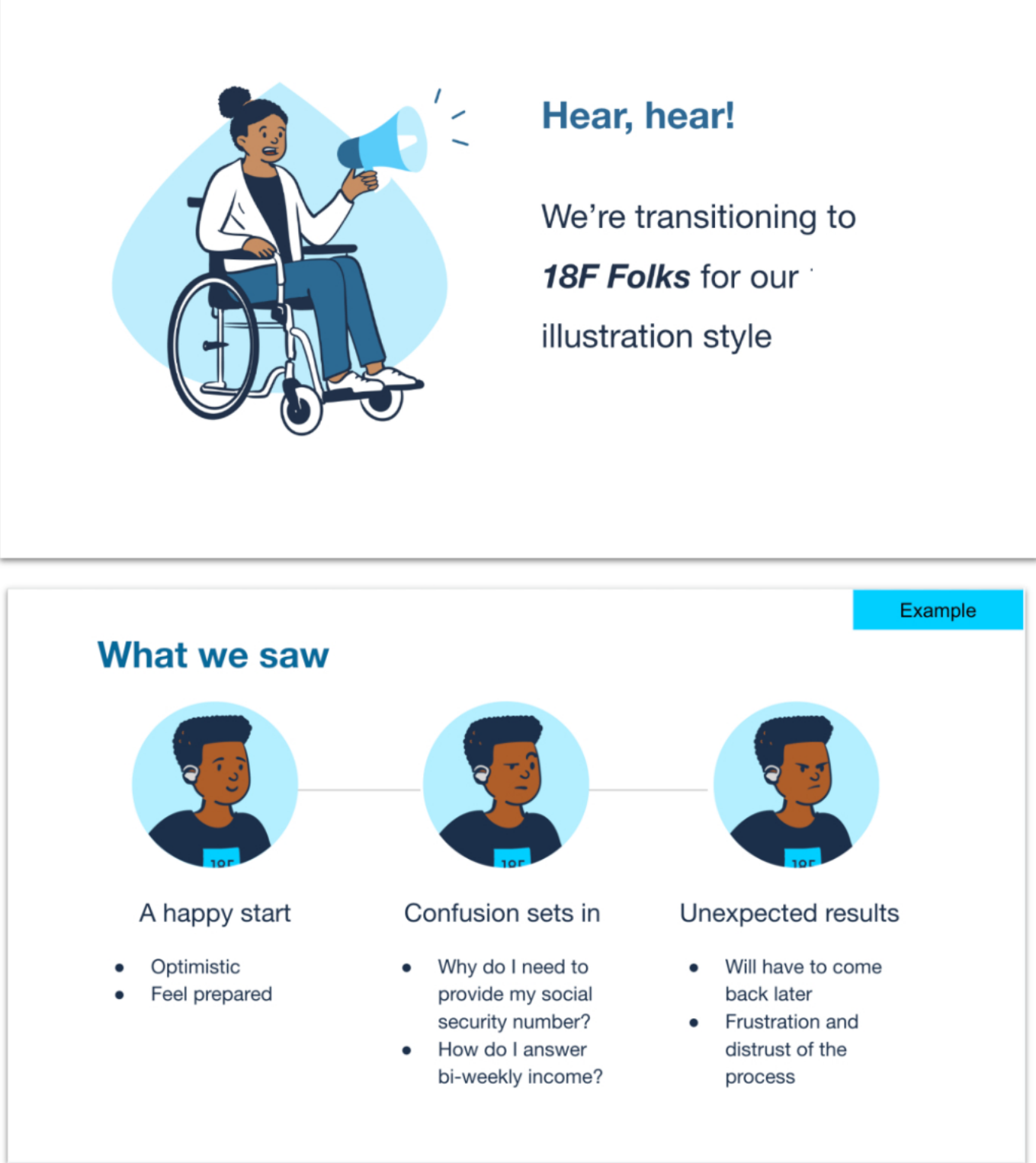


Previous 18F representations of people relied on Avataaars

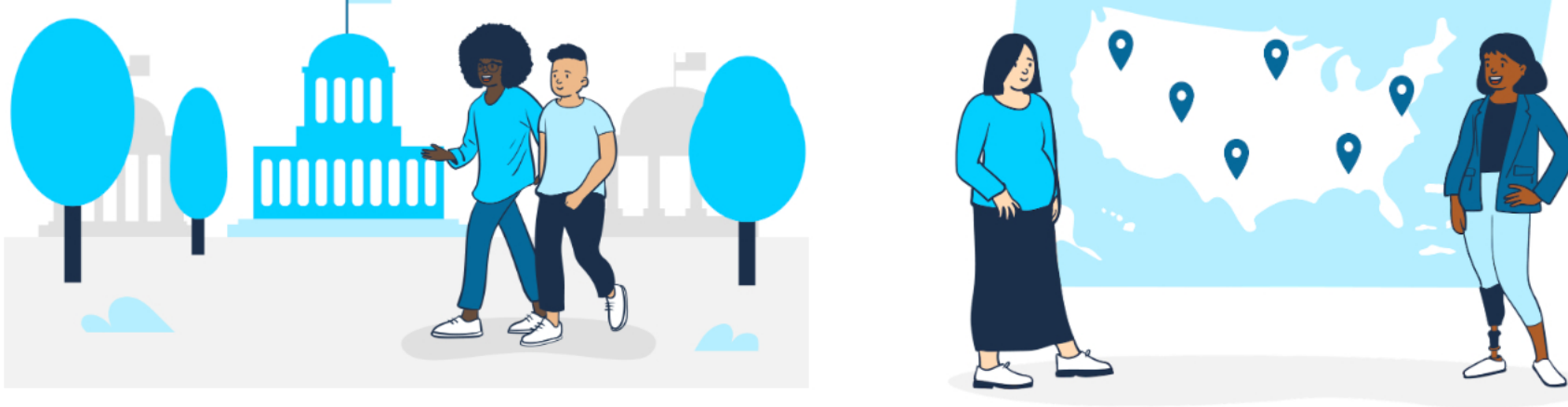
While able to depict a range of skin tones and ages, the bust portraits ultimately proved limiting when trying to represent the vast collective of human experiences.

Our new image style is based on Pablo Stanley's open-source library [Open Peeps](#). We call our version, which reflects the brand's signature blue tones and flat forms, *18F Folks*.

Now our graphics look like:



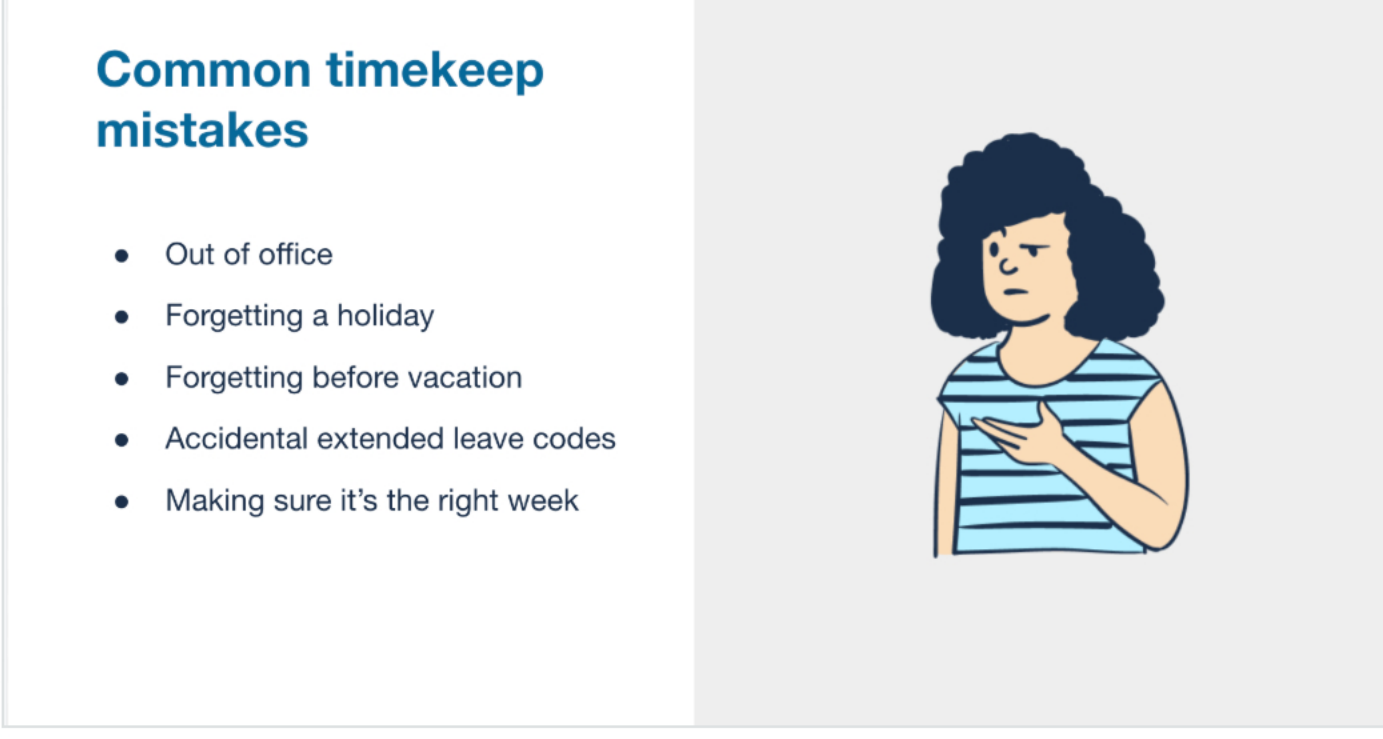
With *18F Folks*, we're able to construct vignettes of people interacting with each other and their environments. This helps us narrate stories about the world we want to build.



The illustration library can showcase diversity, connection, and context

As a government agency, we use branding to inform and engage the public. Relationships emerge from the content we share. For instance, government agencies have reached out after reading this blog, asking how to emulate software systems and service processes. Something as basic as our illustration style impacts how our audience perceives us.

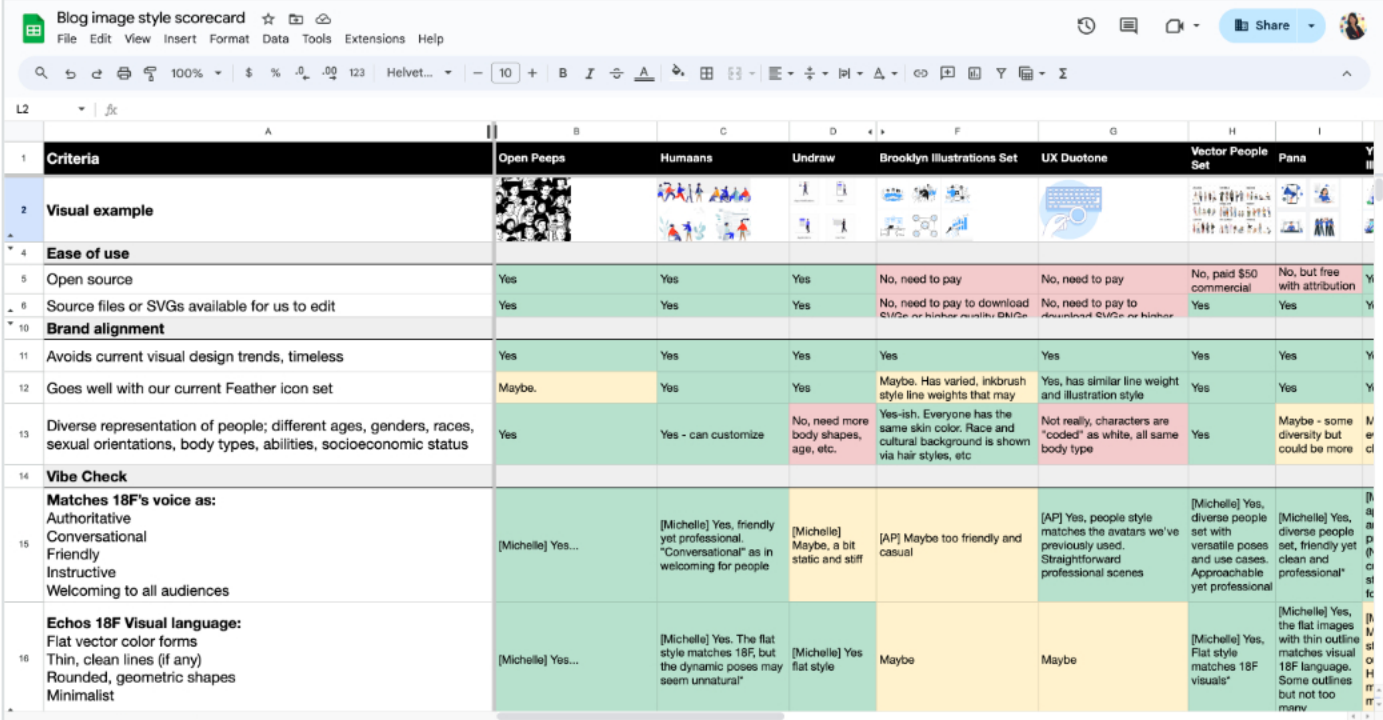
Consider this simple presentation slide.



While the content presents a matter-of-fact list, the shrugging Peep conveys the body language equivalent of "I'm with you. This is confusing." We opted for an illustration style that can cue understanding and trust—emotions more complex than the previous style would allow.

Some organizations may delegate branding directives to a marketing team. At 18F, we leverage the combined strength of our multifaceted design team to bring ideas like *18F Folks* to life. Our content designer took inspiration from 18F's written tone to inform our selection criteria, emphasizing qualities like "welcoming" and "conversational." Service designers conducted research to determine ideal use cases for illustrations.

The team then created a scorecard and conducted a comparative analysis of several illustration libraries. Open Peeps was selected as the basis of the *18F Folks* style because it balances professional with approachable.



We created a scorecard to narrow down our options for an illustration library

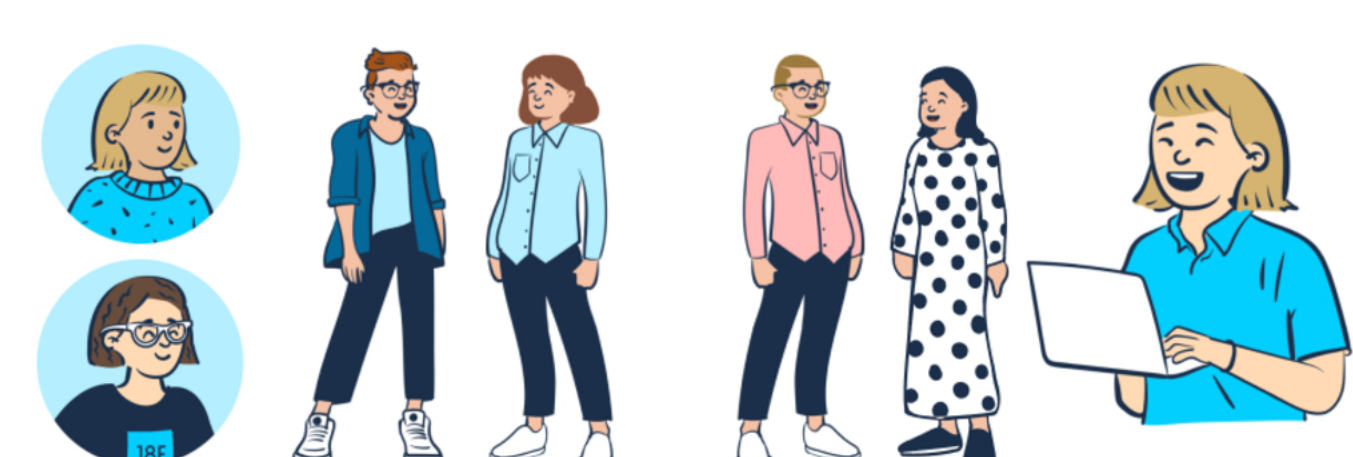
Product managers compiled a list of additional characteristics to make the 18F Folks library even more inclusive. Considerations included diverse religious dress, physical abilities, and body types.



We added custom shirts, a hearing aid, as well as a pregnant person and a child. This is just the start.

On the surface, these depictions are simply bubbly cartoon characters. But we intentionally adopted an illustration style where more people can find themselves reflected in the content we share. When people can see themselves in media, they feel seen. That's why it is so important for us to represent the diverse American public. We want every person to believe that they matter to us—that we are a government by the people, for the people.

After all, good branding is the public celebration of a group's shared values.



18F staff customizing their own Folk

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The US Web Design System gives flexibility so teams can build the right solution for users, but there are still plenty of design decisions that teams need to make to be successful.

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