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Creating Inclusive Learning Programs for Neurodivergent Employees

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In the push to redesign learning and development programs to be more inclusive, tremendous progress has been made to reflect our changing workforce.

However, those in the neurodivergent community may have been underrepresented or even left out of this recent remodeling of learning strategies. Although the term "neurodivergent" may appear to imply that these individuals amount to a "marginal few," neurodivergence is far more prevalent than commonly perceived.
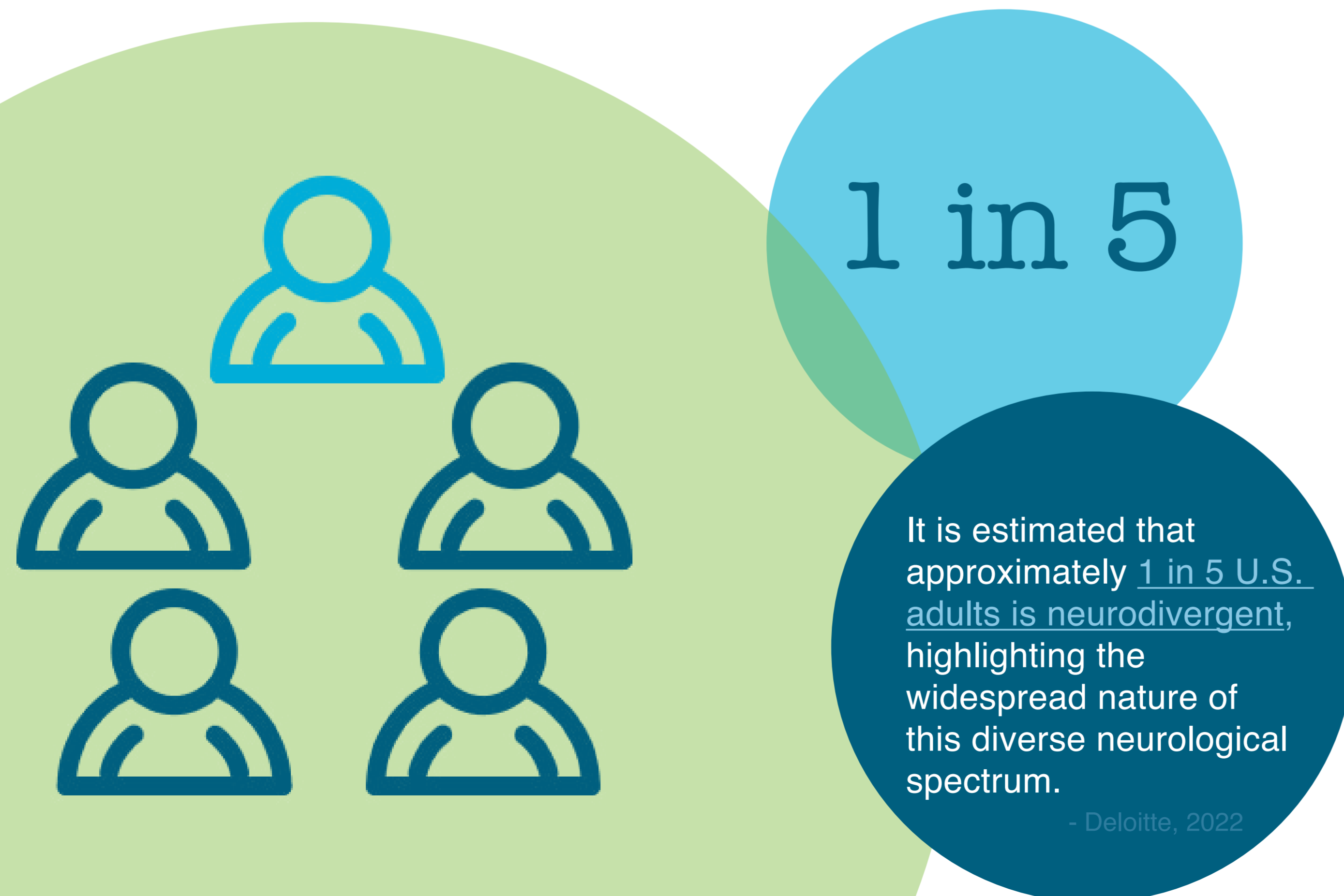
Getting Acquainted: Who's Involved?

The term "neurodivergent" encompasses individuals whose brain function and behavioral traits differ from what is typically considered "normal" or "neurotypical." It is a non-medical term including a variety of cognitive conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and more. The term "neurodiversity" embraces all neurotypes.

Neurodiversity refers to the collective natural range of differences in brain function and behavioral traits among individuals. These differences are regarded as part of normal variation in the human population, making them relatively challenging to identify. Improved diagnostic capabilities, changes to diagnostic criteria, and increased awareness have led to an increase in neurodivergent diagnoses, but there are still many individuals who remain undiagnosed or misdiagnosed.

1 in 5

It is estimated that approximately 1 in 5 U.S. adults is neurodivergent, highlighting the widespread nature of this diverse neurological spectrum.

- Deloitte, 2022

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Statistically speaking, your workplace is likely to be composed of a neurodiverse group, including both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals. It's important to note that "**neurodiverse**" refers to a group of people encompassing multiple neurotypes. Conversely, "**neurodivergent**" specifically refers to individuals. It can be helpful to think of the word "neurodiverse" as simply "diverse" in the context of neurotypes. Using the correct terminology helps promote understanding and inclusivity in discussions about neurodiversity. It also dispels any notion of labeling people as "normal" or "abnormal."

Many of these conditions exist on a spectrum and affect people in vastly different ways, resulting in individuals having varying support needs. Some may require extensive accommodations, whereas others may not require any accommodations at all; however, awareness and consideration will likely help them engage with learning programs. Designing more inclusive solutions to address these needs is becoming increasingly important, especially among Gen Z employees.

In a recent study by Tallo, 99% of Gen Z survey respondents reported that workplace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) is important, and **80% would be more likely to apply to a place that had readily available resources for neurodivergent employees.**

Clearly, neurodiversity is highly valued and important among Gen Z employees (whether they personally identify as neurodivergent or not) and employers must adapt if they wish to hire, engage, and retain Gen Z employees.

Common Behavioral Traits, Advantages, & Challenges

While there are common traits, neurodivergence can manifest differently for each individual. According to the DSM-5-TR, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is generally characterized by deficits in social communication and social reciprocity, and restrictive repetitive behaviors/interests. ADHD and ASD share several common characteristics such as sensory sensitivities and self-soothing behaviors. Other neurodivergent traits may include difficulty reading printed words, processing auditory information, organizing information, and completing executive functions.

> With the right tools and support, **neurodiverse teams can be 30% more productive than those comprised of solely neurotypical people.**
>
> - Deloitte, 2022

In fact, many cognitive conditions have been found to bestow unique gifts and strengths that can enhance productivity, quality, innovation, and engagement. People with ADHD have frequently demonstrated a heightened ability to work well under pressure and adjust to change. This characteristic can be vital for success in any number of occupations. Similarly, people diagnosed with dyslexia have shown proficiency in data analysis, specifically, identifying patterns and trends.
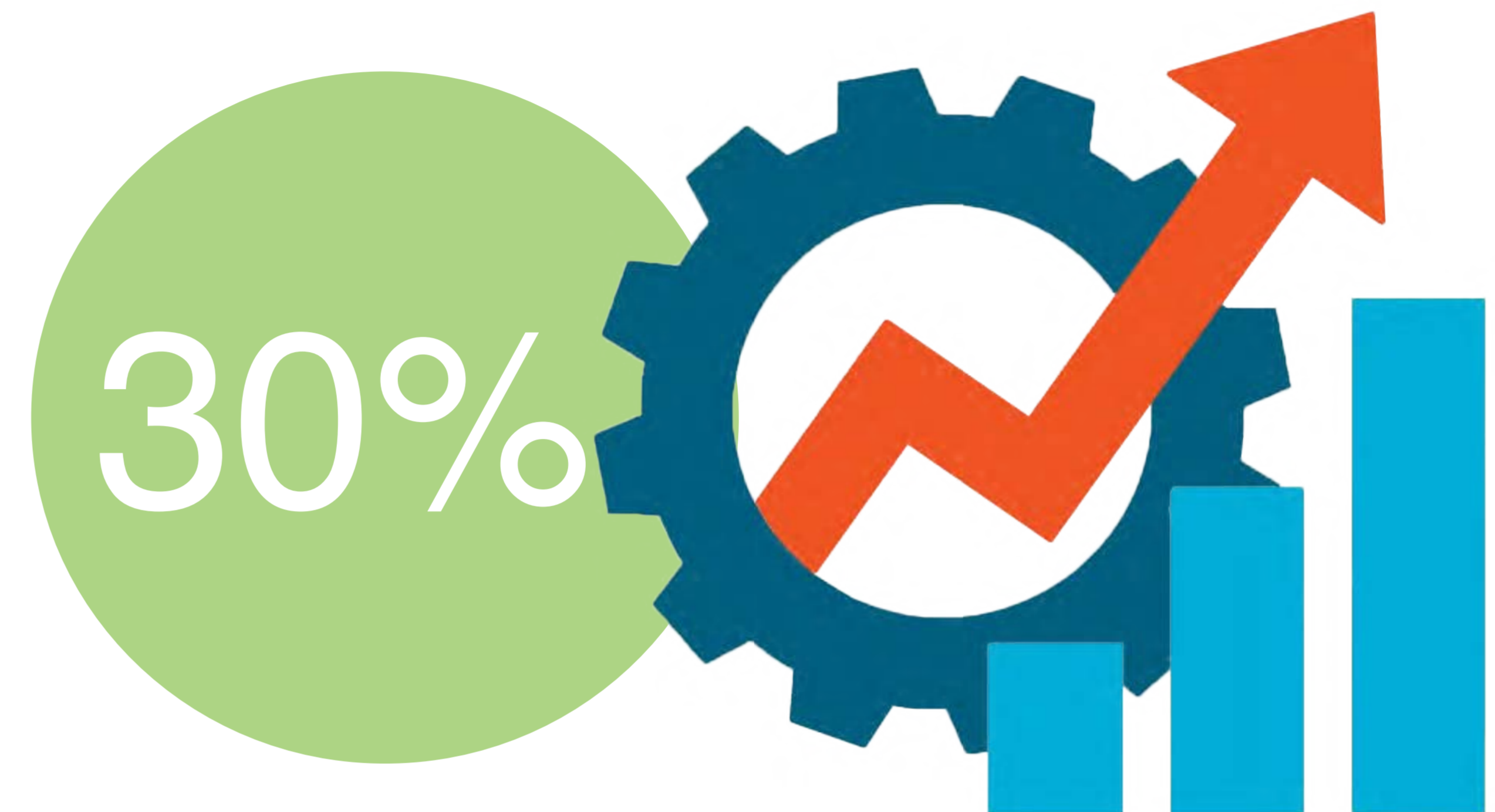
What This Means for Employers

Learning leaders can take steps to leverage these strengths and better support their neurodivergent employees through learning objectives and considerations. Ultimately, these learning programs can enable them to become more effective, innovative, and productive team members. Every neurodivergent brain learns and processes differently (just as every neurotypical brain does) but there are commonalities to learning needs. This can include direct communication, frequent short breaks, visual examples, personalized learning paths, a quiet learning environment, and simple techniques to maintain focus.

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A Tale of 2 Training Programs

While it is not inherently harder for neurodivergent individuals to learn and succeed, they often require a different approach. To illustrate the difference in experiences in a training setting, let's consider the stories of two employees: Mia (neurotypical) and Anita (neurodivergent).

Mia and Anita are both assigned an in-person training session, led by an instructor whose voice is unamplified, consisting of a slideshow, a few short videos, and group discussions.

A parallel could be drawn to the cultural predisposition to right-handedness. From everyday tools to classroom furniture, the implicit biases toward neurotypical individuals have resulted in a world that isn't built to cater to the diverse needs of neurodivergent individuals.

Mia found the training session relatively engaging and straightforward. She was able to concentrate on the instructor's voice without difficulty despite the noise and movement in the room. She found the environment stimulating, interacted with others without issue, and even felt energized by the group discussions. The material did feel boring at times, but she remained focused on understanding the concepts and considering how to apply them in her daily work. Mia took copious notes and felt confident that she understood the material being presented.

Alternately, Anita, who is neurodivergent and has ADHD, found it challenging to focus on the instructor's voice while also processing the surrounding noise and movement in the room. She found herself easily distracted by small details, such as the flickering of the fluorescent lights or the sound of a fellow learner's persistent cough. She had a hard time processing and retaining the information and found it difficult to participate in group discussions. Anita became very self-conscious of her co-worker's perception of her struggle to engage in the learning process. She began to mask her difficulties by appearing engaged rather than focusing on the material.

A Tale of 2 Training Programs (Cont'd)

In Anita's case, she may have benefitted from having some control over her learning environment. This would have allowed her to prevent auditory or visual overstimulation. Additionally, using online forum discussions may have alleviated pressure to dynamically participate in group discussions by allowing her to engage in meaningful conversations at her own pace. She may also have learned better with short videos containing visual aids, including closed captioning and transcripts. The ability to adjust the video speed and playback can also help her stay engaged during parts that felt slow or irrelevant.

Offering Choice

Creating inclusive learning spaces for neurodivergent learners begins by embracing the learner as a contributor to their training. Affording them choices in shaping their learning experience can increase engagement and boost knowledge transfer. In practice, this could mean creating multiple modalities for learning objectives, where and when possible. Creating asynchronous training materials that may supplant the need for live, instructor-led training could help achieve learner buy-in for the process.

Fostering more inclusive solutions means offering the learner customization options in the presentation of the technology. This includes personalizing dashboards by adding, removing, and arranging gadgets. Progress trackers, certification plans, and daily snapshots can help employees organize their course materials and understand their progress, resulting in a more comfortable and supportive learning experience. Inversely, the ability to remove features is important, as well. Things like progress bars and badges can be potential detractors, producing a sense of shame or anxiety for failure to complete the task(s). These customization features also demonstrate an employer's commitment to inclusivity and can lead to a more productive and fulfilled workforce.
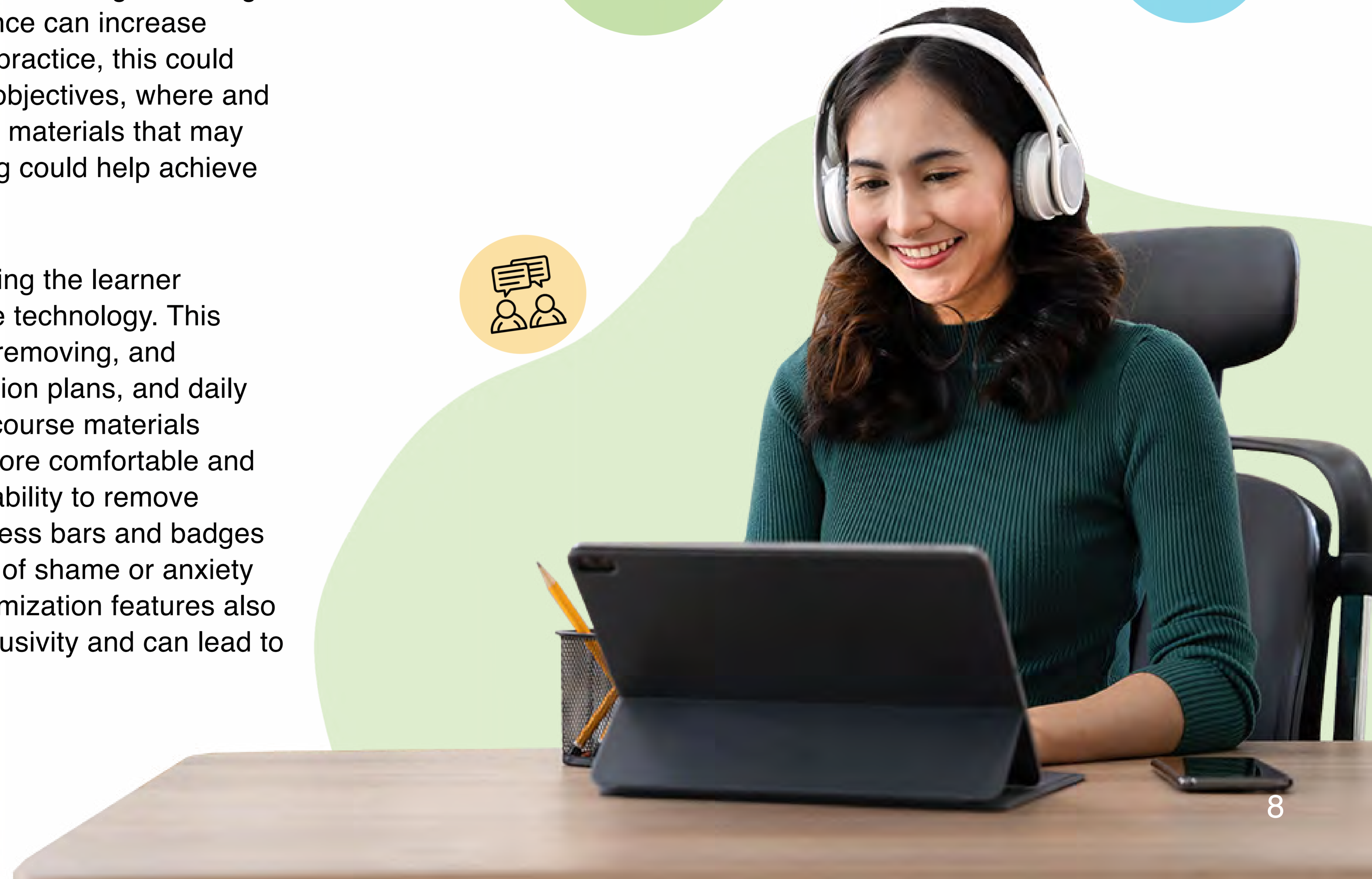
Assessments & Feedback

Ongoing learner assessments and feedback can also be very different experiences for the neurodivergent community. Try offering choices in how assessments are delivered and feedback is given. This is especially true when examining multiple modalities for assessing knowledge transfer and the environments in which they take place. Thinking beyond a written exam, and allowing for alternative methods to demonstrate knowledge can potentially remove bias from the process. Video assessments can showcase strengths and abilities in different ways than traditional written exams. Individuals with dyslexia may struggle in this modality but may be excellent at verbally explaining concepts or presenting their ideas on camera.

Similarly, autistic individuals may have difficulty with social interactions but may excel at demonstrating their skills through a video presentation or practical demonstration. Video assessments can also provide employees with a way to practice real-world applications in a low-pressure environment that doesn't drain their social battery.

Keep in mind that good feedback is a two-way conversation. Individuals within the neurodivergent community may have valuable thoughts on improvements and constructive feedback but may prefer alternative communication methods. By offering multiple ways to submit feedback - such as screenshots, written explanations, or voice recordings - organizations can help to ensure that everyone's perspectives are effectively conveyed and understood.

Video assessment tools have been used as part of the hiring process for years, often as a soft first interaction/interview.

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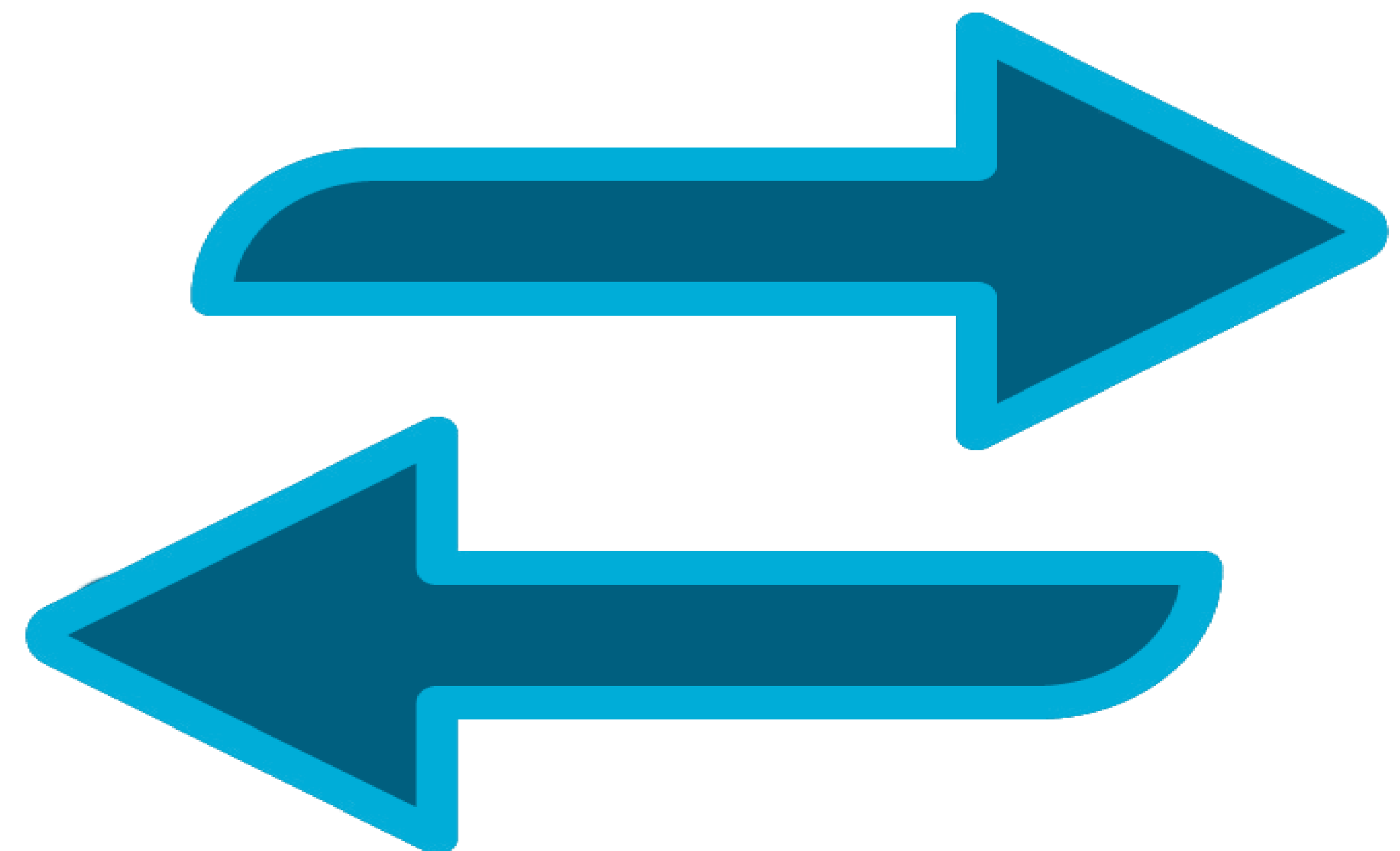
Creating Behavioral Nudges

Gamification in learning and development has steadily grown in popularity, as learning leaders look to subconsciously influence learner activity. The neurodivergent community is no stranger to gamification, as many utilize this concept to optimize their own day-to-day lives. It can be particularly beneficial and impactful for people with ADHD and ASD. Creating segmented, achievable, and daily goals offers the brain a small, but beneficial dose of dopamine. Small goal-setting habits help individuals engage with the process and stay on task by providing a sense of control and structure. Learning leaders can experiment with this by applying progress-tracking displays, badges, and ranks to the learning experience. Offering choices to the learner in this area can help them find a comfortable amount of data to be reminded of in the LMS.

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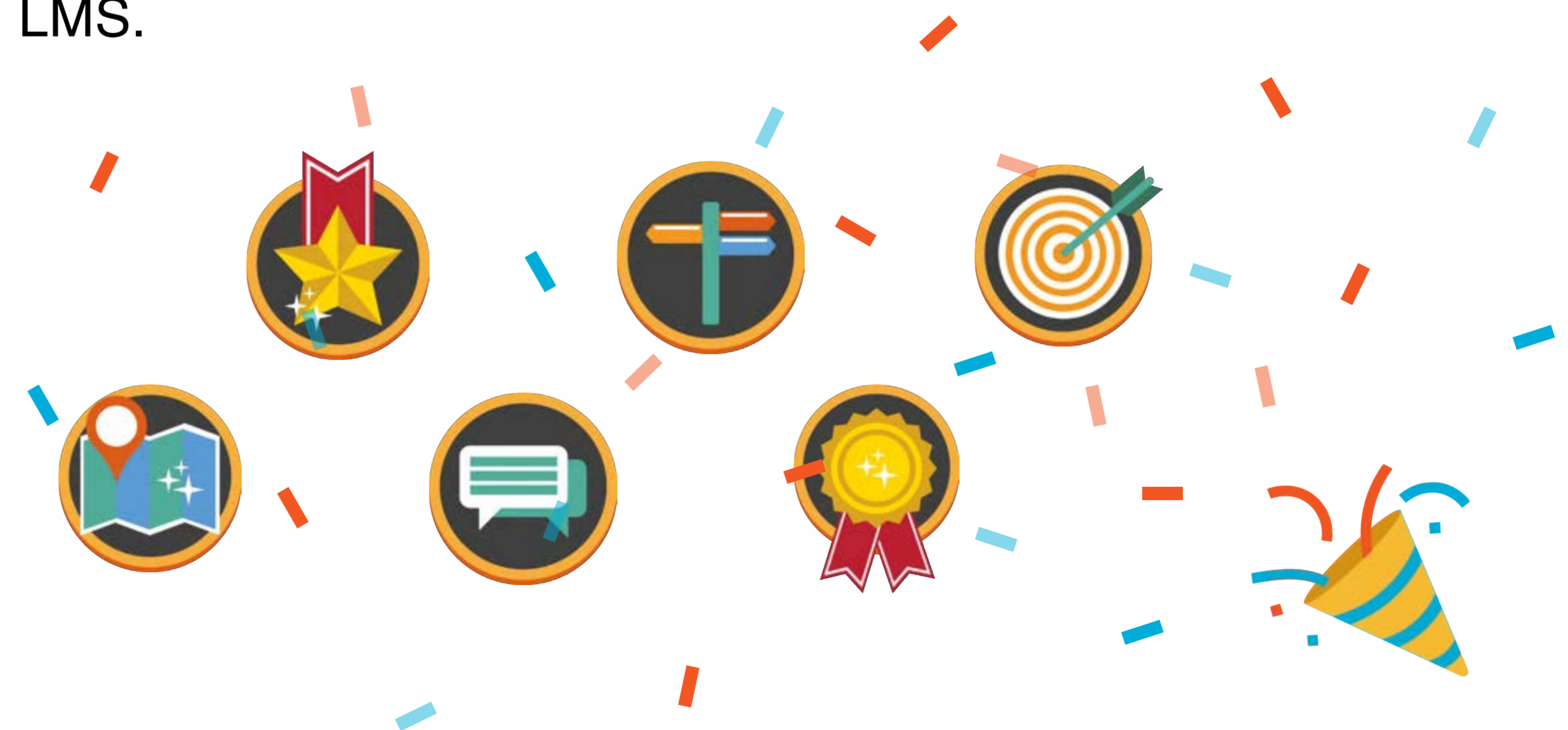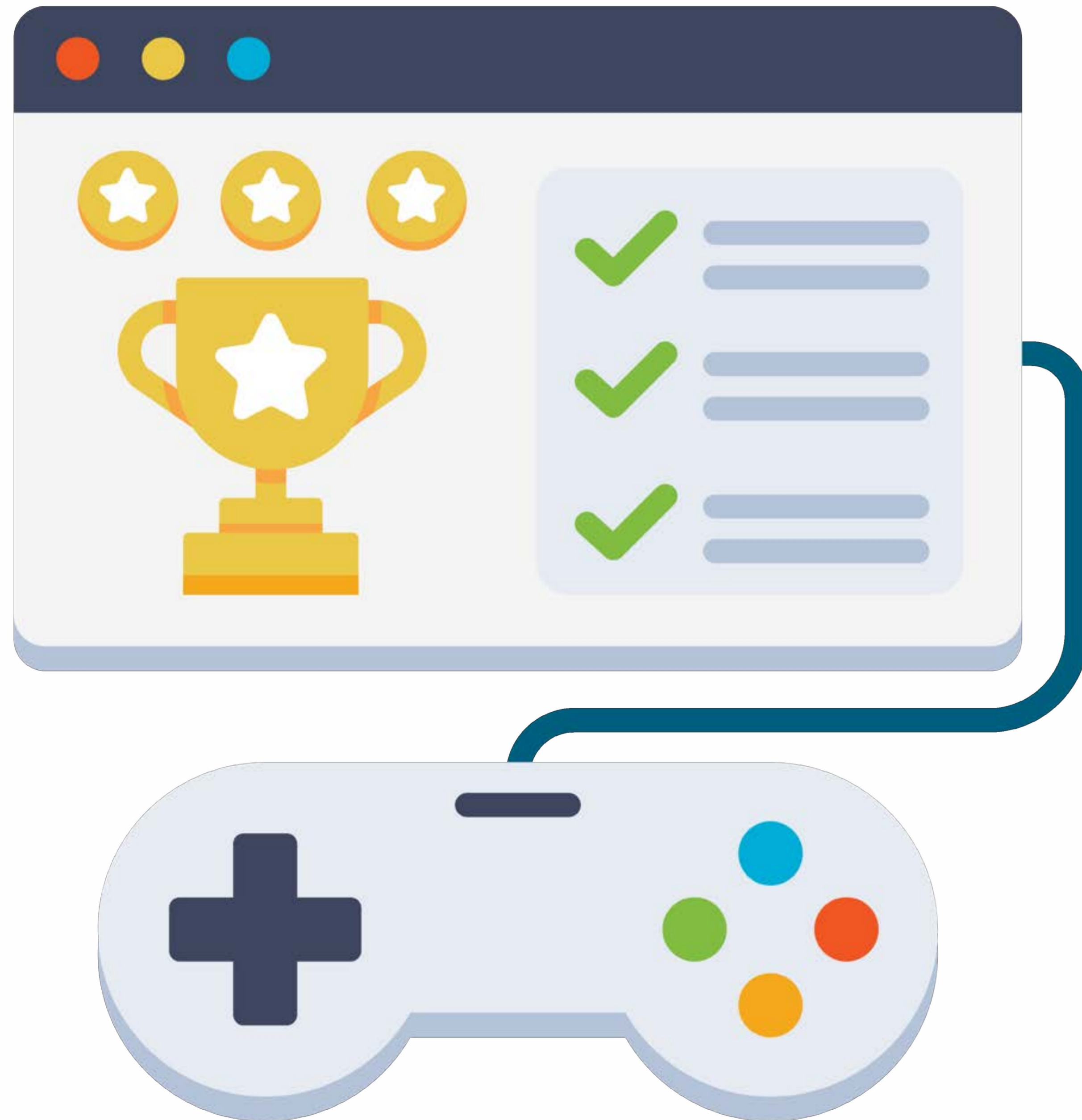
> " Sensory processing is how our brains receive and respond to information from our senses. It affects how we perceive and react to what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. Our brains decide which sensory input requires a response and which can be ignored, happening unconsciously and quickly. When there is alignment between sensory processing, work tasks, and the environment, it enhances performance and well-being in the workplace. "

Karmen Nyberg

Occupational Therapist at Fraser, a Minnesota nonprofit working with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and specializing in autism.

Setting Your Neurodivergent Employees Up for Success

Every brain processes sensory input differently, but these differences can be more impactful for neurodivergent individuals. Sensory processing differences can be a significant barrier to learning for neurodivergent individuals. For individuals with sensory hyper-sensitivity, certain stimuli can be overwhelming and impact their ability to function and process information. Conversely, people with sensory hypo-sensitivities can feel energized and focused from repeated exposure to sensory experiences. Sensory sensitivities for neurodivergent people shouldn't be relegated to comments about being "high-strung" or "difficult." They are legitimate neurological differences that can have a profound impact on an individual's daily life.

Fraser's autism program is the oldest and largest in Minnesota. The nonprofit has served the community for over 80 years. They create inclusive learning environments for individuals with unique learning preferences to help achieve successful results. Fraser has used The Brainier LMS to deliver inclusive learning experiences for their employees for over 3 years.

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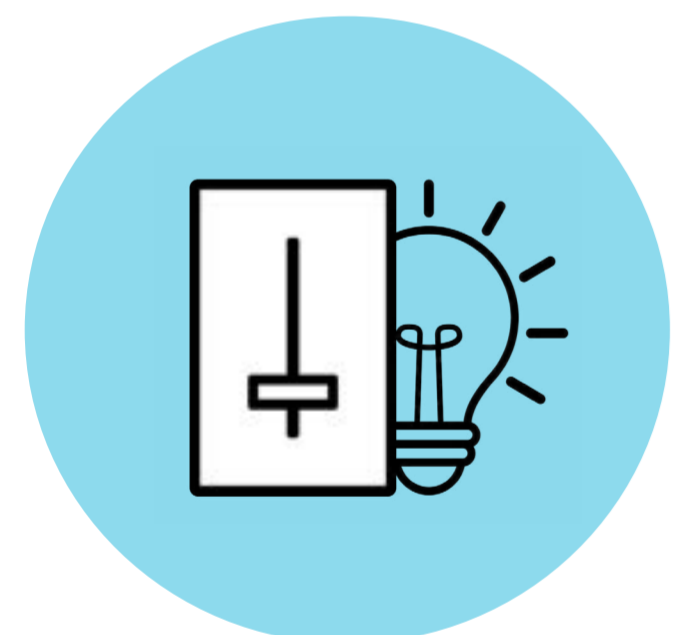To learn more about Fraser, visit www.fraser.org

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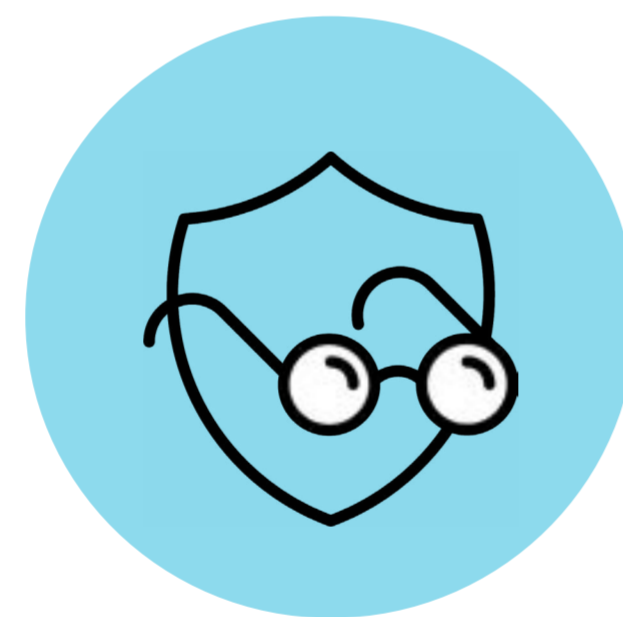# Ways to Create More Inclusive Training Environments

Noise-cancelling headphones

Designated quiet space for learning

Adjustable lighting options

Blue light-blocking glasses

These simple and inexpensive accommodations can make existing training environments more inclusive and more conducive to learning. When planning a learning objective, consider which conference room or training environment will produce the best results.

Wellness Action Items:

1. Intervals between training sessions for rest or rejuvenation.
2. Opportunities to change modes (step outside briefly or take a short walk).
3. Adaptable workspaces and flexible seating.
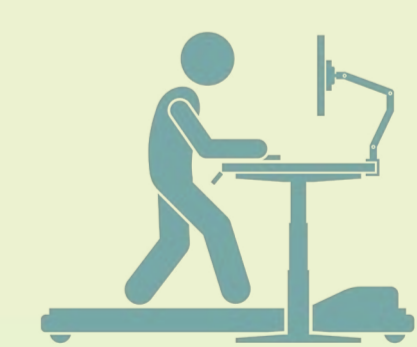
Setting Your Neurodivergent Employees Up for Success (Cont'd)

Additionally, offering flexible scheduling and training format options can accommodate individuals who knowingly achieve peak performance at specific times of the day or need to take breaks to reach prime outcomes. While eLearning can be a great option, it may not necessarily eliminate sensory challenges.

When developing online training materials, consider factors like:

- The volume of background music on eLearning courses
- How crowded or easy it is to understand the visuals
- Whether transcripts are available
- Whether the learning content auto-advances

These factors increase cognitive load and ultimately reduce learning for not only neurodivergent individuals but also neurotypical individuals.
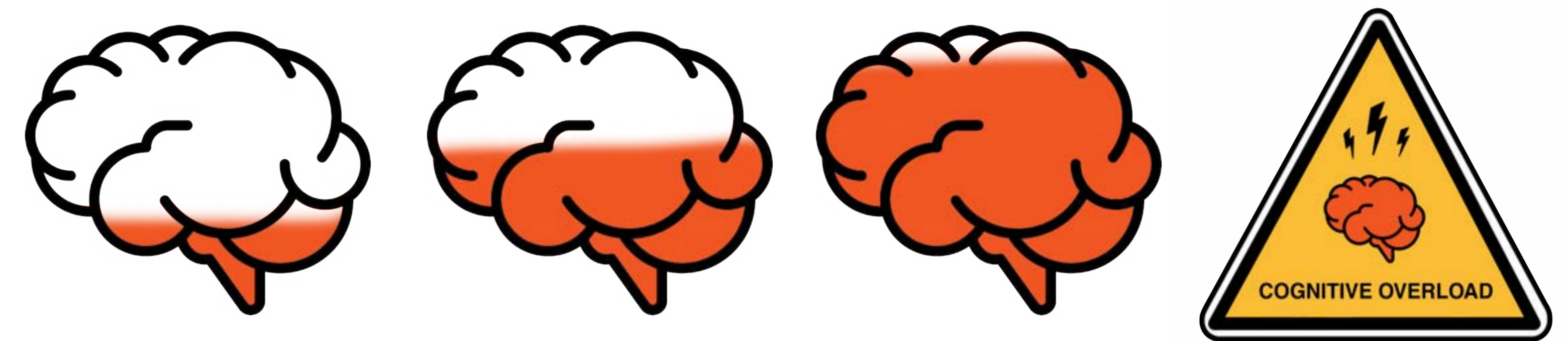
Creating multiple modalities of learning objects obviously requires extra effort on the part of the administrator. Using equivalencies in the learning technology is a powerful tool that can eliminate administrative "red tape." Equivalencies work by assigning the same value to different training formats to provide a consistent learning experience across all modalities. For example, many instructor-led training (ILT) events can also be virtual by using web conferencing technology. Similarly, an eLearning course can be converted into reference materials and transcripts, to be accessed at any time. Appealing to the learner's preferences can remove barriers to learning, whether it's a live training session, a self-paced eLearning course, or a series of reference materials.

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Tools for Success

Learning new technology can create a crisis of confidence for anyone, neurotypical or otherwise. Seeking help to navigate or understand technical issues can produce anxiety in learners who fear they will be perceived as incompetent or incapable. This can be especially true for neurodivergent learners who find social interactions difficult. Supporting them with a self-service knowledge base, email, chat, and phone support can alleviate some of this anxiety.
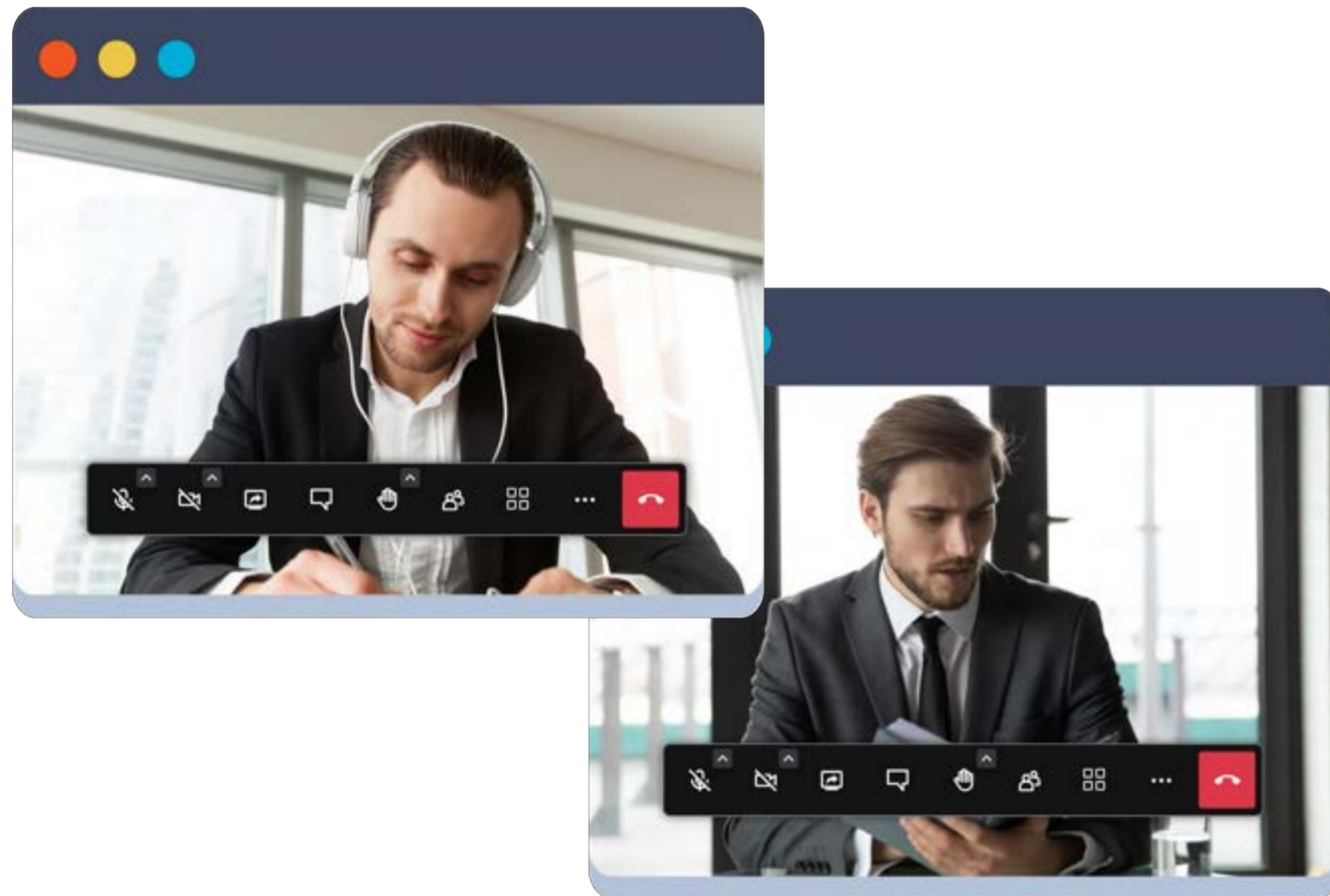
While some neurodivergent individuals may struggle with social cues, eye contact, or small talk, most still want to connect with others and form relationships. Organizations can leverage eLearning technology for social interactions around learning and development. Structured activities and/or goal-oriented interactions like forums and user groups based on shared interests or projects could accomplish this. In an LMS with features like chat, video conferencing, forums, discussion posts, etc., individuals can express themselves in a way that suits their communication style. These features also allow asynchronous communication so individuals can communicate and collaborate at their own pace and on their schedule.

Using an LMS as a centralized hub for communication and collaboration can help to avoid confusion, misunderstandings, and exclusion.
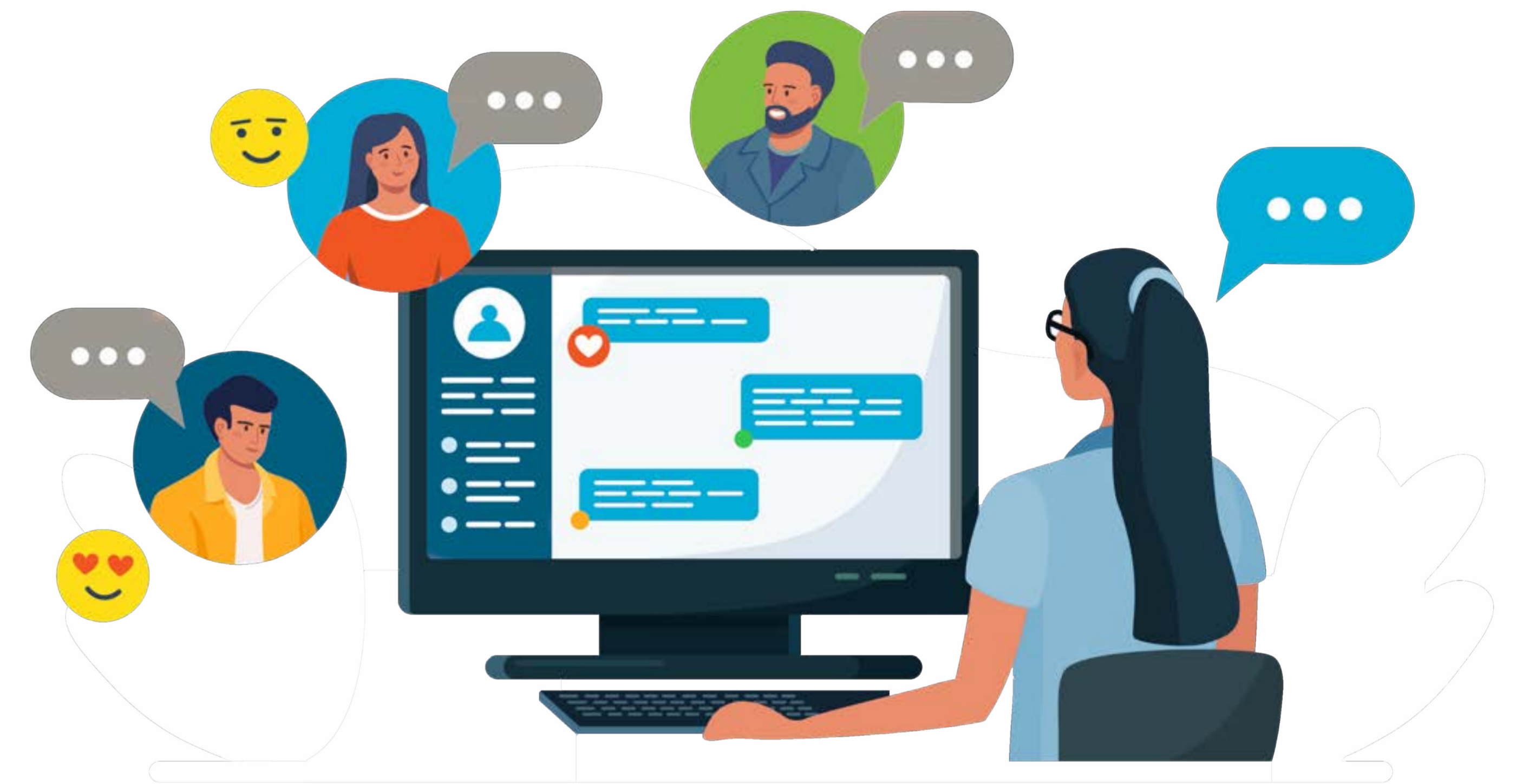
Accessibility features and other assistive technology can offer advantages for neurodivergent learners. For example, closed captions and transcripts can be helpful for those with auditory processing disorders; customizable fonts and text sizes can improve legibility for those with dyslexia; and adjustable video speeds can help those with ADHD to stay focused. Some features in the LMS can also be utilized for common neurodivergent productivity techniques like body doubling, Pomodoro, and first pancake productivity.

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Productivity Techniques

Pomodoro

Pomodoro involves breaking down tasks into short, focused work sessions followed by short breaks. LMS platforms can provide tools such as timers, progress trackers, and reminders to help individuals stay on task and focused during each work session.

First Pancake Productivity

First pancake productivity is a neurodivergent spin on the popular productivity tool "eat the frog." It involves setting a low bar for a task's initial output and then refining and improving it later. Video assessment technology can be a great tool for this, as it allows employees structured practice and self-assessment before submitting their best work. By using these techniques, neurodivergent individuals can receive the structure, support, and motivation to improve their productivity and help to achieve their goals.

Body Doubling

Body doubling involves working alongside someone else who is also working on a task. In an LMS, video conferencing or screen-sharing tools can provide a connection. This technique can be useful for individuals who struggle with starting or staying on task, as it provides accountability and social support. This may be effective for learners in a specific learning track in a cohort environment with coaching opportunities.

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Inclusion Means ALL

Neurodivergent individuals are not a homogeneous group and have diverse needs and preferences. Ensuring that training programs are accessible and effective for everyone means keeping an open dialogue about needs and being aware of potential barriers. Surveys within the LMS can be an effective tool to discover barriers, challenges, and needs that may not have been considered previously. Inclusion means not making assumptions about individual abilities, needs, social preferences, etc., and catering to the learner's unique strengths and challenges. Each individual brings a unique set of skills to the workplace and may present different techniques, accommodation requirements, support needs, and social preferences. By listening to employees and respecting learning preference and needs, organizations can create a more inclusive workplace that values diversity and promotes the success of all employees.

> It's important to recognize that even if you have tools that can accommodate neurodivergent folks, not everyone is the same and it is important to encourage people to advocate for their needs and for employers to accommodate to help facilitate their learning and success.

Anna Trout

MA LMFT, a Minnesota-based therapist that works with neurodivergent individuals and is autistic herself

The Brainier LMS

- ✓ Video coaching & assessments
- ✓ Engaging gamification
- ✓ Robust analytics suite
- ✓ Customizable dashboards
- ✓ Personalized learning paths
- ✓ Supports completion equivalencies
- ✓ Closed captioning capabilities
- ✓ Video conferencing
- ✓ Chat, forums, & discussions

... and more!

Need help developing more inclusive training programs?

Developing more inclusive learning programs can be challenging and time consuming, especially if you're operating with limited resources. When you partner with Brainier, you'll be paired with a dedicated implementation specialist who can help guide you through each step of the process and give helpful tips along the way. To find out how The Brainier LMS can help your organization develop more inclusive learning and development programs, request a free personalized demo by clicking below.

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