Boomers, Gen Y:
Talented young workers aim to

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They wear flip-flops to work, reveal personal information online, and see no reason why their work schedules can’t be flexible.

Ladies and gents, please welcome Generation Y, now tango dancing around their boomers’ managers in the workplace.

The mixing of these two groups — with Gen Xers wedged in the middle — is one of the hottest human resource topics, as employers struggle to attract and keep the valuable but unharnessed young talents of Generation Y. All eyes are on this emerging group who are destined to replace an aging workforce and match work culture to their cyber-hip lifestyle. But like all newcomers, Gen Yers have a thing or two to learn about fitting in before they turn things upside down.

“Children today, by and large, are brighter than the previous generation and they know things faster and have access to a wide variety of information,” said James French, 51, Executive Vice President of Human Resources for Hill Holliday of Boston. “Each generation has been quicker on the uptake than the previous.”

Right now America’s workforce continues to get grayer. By next year, when the oldest of the boomer generation turns 62, the median age of the workforce is expected to rise to 40.7 from 38.7, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Those older workers are soon to be leading an exodus into retirement that will put pressure on employers to find younger replacements.

Moreover, there are several important sectors which will have acute needs for new qualified employees in the coming years. The Massachusetts Division of Career Services, says job growth will balloon over the next seven years in the following fields: Computer and mathematical occupations by almost 26 percent; network systems analysts, by 43 percent; and biomedical engineering positions by 34 percent. Also, biochemist, biophysicist, and medical scientist jobs will grow by 31 percent.

Even now, though, there are a number of workplace challenges. Generation Y, born since 1978, are supposedly nonconformists. Older workers, those born between 1946 and 1954, are now the middle and upper level managers. And despite the radical

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changes many from these generations trumpeted during the ‘60s and ‘70s, they now represent the workplace status quo. (Ironically, the in-between Gen Xers who helped usher in the volatile dot-com era of the late ‘90s, are getting less attention while everyone focuses on the incoming and outgoing generations.)

Though she tries not to stereotype, some are undeniable differences between the boomers and Generation Y, also called millennials, said Nancy Moby, the president and chief executive of Insight Performance Inc., of Dedham.

Boomers respect authority; millennials question it. Boomers grew up during the women’s movement. Gen Yers are its offspring. Such experiences shape each generation.

Moby’s team helps companies manage human resource needs, and is assisting the owners of a Boston consulting firm develop a pipeline of junior consultants who will be required to meet with clients.
Yers mix it up to fit in with a graying workforce

Want to learn more?
The Northeast Human Resources Association is hosting a conference on the Boomer-Gen Y work cocktail.

What: Multigenerational Workforces: How to Successfully (and Legally) Manage Millennials, Boomers and Everything in Between

Where: Tufts, Sept. 17, 7:30-10:00 a.m.

Where: The Conference Center at Waltham Woods, Waltham

For more information: visit www.nehra.com/events

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including biotechnology and the acute needs for new qualifieds.

So here we have this crop of baby boomers and this new crop of millennials coming,” she said. “What we’re finding is a lot of differences between the culture of the established company and this new crop of workers.”

Among the biggest issues is dress, she said. The younger group’s tight-fitting clothing and casual wear are not blending with the corporate culture. She’s advising the managers to establish a dress policy, and to tell the younger workers to understand the culture and dress appropriately. “You cannot show up in a t-shirt and flip-flops,” she said. On the other hand, said Mobsby, employers need to realize that flexible work hours and autonomy may be a great incentive for recruiting younger talent. Millennials want more say in their workplace projects, but also want more time for hobbies and family life. Yet, where boomers might have been more willing to sacrifice homelife for late hours at the office to advance their careers, millennials seem more willing to stand up and demand a better balance between time at work and outside.

Though such overtures raise questions about the younger generation’s work ethic, it also forces managers to rethink their position and lighten up or lose talent to a competitor.

Savvy as they may be in some areas, Generation Y can be surprisingly naïve when it comes to a defining medium of their age: The Internet. Posting photos of yourself at a frat party or posing suggestively on social networking websites is a real no-no, say specialists. And the millennials have yet to understand why the boomers cringe when they hear about the younger groups’ revealing entries on such websites as LiveJournal or MySpace.

The first generation to grow up with the Internet, millennials see it as a cyber playground and have no sense of its international reach, said French.

“The younger the population, the more open they are in every sense of the word in terms of the way they dress, the way they speak, the way they communicate through the Internet,” said French, who teaches an organizational dynamics class at Boston University. “They don’t have much of a filter in terms of communicating and in terms of the way they act and dress.

“Employers search social networking sites before making a job offer, said Mobsby, and some profiles have been known to raise eyebrows.

Specialists note that photographs can reveal too much about personal interests, and tell-all comments about family life or relationships can undermine a professional composure.

“It’s definitely not the message you want to convey back to the workplace,” Mobsby said. “My advice is don’t do that. You’ll be automatically eliminated.”

Sarah Felch may not dress the part of a typical Generation Yer. The 23-year-old staff assistant at the Harvard University Alumni Affairs and Development office is the youngest of an eight-member team. But for work: one day last month her outfit consisted of the relatively nondescript khaki pants, brown loafers, a white-collared shirt and a navy cable knit sweater. “Everyone does it,” she said. “It’s basic. I’ve had good job with fitting in with the culture,” she said of her office setting. But among the reasons she took the Harvard position are the benefits it offered, benefits that outweighed offerings from other potential employers: tuition reimbursement and affordable rates on credit courses, discounted gym membership and tickets to sports events and movie screenings and weekly “Spirits” days, designed to bring people together to share a snow cone or a waffle breakfast for a few moments of enjoyment.

“I think the benefits Harvard offers are wonderful to people of my generation,” said Felch, who graduated in May from Connecticut College with a bachelor’s of arts degree. “That’s something no one else can compete with in my mind.”

In five years, Felch could have a new career direction thanks to the continuing education opportunities at Harvard, or she may have garnered so much knowledge about nonprofit fund-raising that she’ll be in high demand.

“People who have about five years experience in a specific area,” said Jeff Arnold, senior consultant for Watson Wyatt Worldwide of Wellesley, “become even more valuable. That’s where the talent wars are.”

The concern is so pervasive that the Northeast Human Resources Association is holding a conference on the challenges of managing millennials and boomers.

Attracting a technical engineer at the beginning of his career can mean millions in future revenue, said Arnold, “because these are the people who are designing new products.

“So, if I’m looking to attract that kind of person and team, then what I want to know is what are the kinds of things that motivate the young savvy technical person,” he said. Mobsby agreed. “Instead of saying I don’t understand this new generation,” she said, “embrace and understand it, because it’s here.”

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