# Our Guest Contributor, Rhonda Beard:

A person smiling for the camera

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Rhonda is an innovative leader with a passion for helping businesses build their teams by developing skills, improving performance and retaining top performers.

She joined Bench Builders after spending over 20 years leading HR teams across multiple sites in small, family-owned businesses as well as Fortune 500 companies.

Rhonda has helped companies through a wide range of challenges, including acquisitions, divestitures, rebranding, and most recently, a wide variety of changes and challenges businesses and HR professionals are experiencing through COVID-19.

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**HR – The New Normal**

As businesses start to re-open, and plan for the “New Normal” or “Next Normal” phase, the biggest concern from employees is still their health and safety.

Many companies must make significant changes to their workplace in order to reopen – more thorough and frequent cleaning, masks, temperature checks, social distancing, barriers between work stations.

This is not a short-term issue that will go away in a few months. It may be quite some time before we go back to business as we knew it just 90 days ago. So businesses need plans on how they will operate in the “Next Normal” phase.

**Human Resources’ role has become very critical during the pandemic. HR’s role is typically to balance protecting the business with protecting employees.**

**Protecting employees:**

Some employees will be unhappy with new restrictions. Others may have anxiety about returning to work.

Determine who is really essential – needs to be back at work. How often do they need to be physically be at the office, or can they still work from home?

* #1 is facilitating open, honest and frequent communication with employees. May need multiple methods to reach all – e:mail, text, in-person, written.
* Share steps company is taking to protect employees and grow business.
* Help employees get used to new guidelines and work environment. Will be tough for some.
* Listen to individual concerns, personal situations – many will still have children at home, out of school, no childcare available. May have a spouse out of work, family health concerns.
* Focus on providing safe work environment, which could include:
  + New workspace layout
  + More frequent cleaning
  + Ensure supply of personal hygiene/cleaning products
  + Masks, gloves, shields
  + Taking employee temperatures
  + Train employees who will be involved in cleaning, taking temps, etc.
  + Meetings online instead of in person, even if everyone is in the office
* Proactively provide and communicate resources available such as EAP, United Way and other community support.

**Protecting the Business:**

* Know and understand CDC, OSHA, Federal, State and Local guidelines company needs to comply with.
* Provide written guidelines to employees with clear communication on safety protocols and steps employer is taking, as well as expectations of employees.
* Post in multiple locations across company
* May consider having employees sign agreement of understanding
* Maintain employee privacy/confidentiality and stay in compliance with HIPAA, ADA, FMLA

**Flexible Work Options**

Many companies haven’t been open to Telework, but now see it can work. Find reasons to make it work, rather than reasons it won’t.

Companies need to think differently about their whole business, and Telework is just one topic. Most were thrown into telework, with no experience or guidelines for employees.

* Develop Telework Policy or guidelines
* Work with Leadership to be more flexible with employees
* Consider flexible hours to accommodate personal situations
* May change shifts, hours, rotate staff on days in office
* If needed at work, consider transition plan to accommodate person situations
* Communication is important – Millennials having most difficulty adjusting due to being least experienced, confident, may have kids at home.

Remote Work and Flexibility has many advantages.

* Reduce absences
* Improve work/life balance
* Eliminate or shorten unnecessary meetings
* Reduce costs to company – real estate, floor space, furniture, business travel
* Reduce cost/time to employees commuting to work

**Other actions** to be equipped for “Next Normal”:

* Develop or update policies affected by current situation:
  + Flexible Work Options
  + Leave of Absence
  + Attendance
  + Benefits – EAP, Co-pays, coverage
  + Environmental Health and Safety
* Ensure Emergency and business contingency plans include pandemic provisions
* Communication plans
* How to handle cutbacks with least disruption
* Train managers:
* How to lead differently in a new environment – strongest leaders will emerge during times of crisis.
* Communication and empathy with employees
* Communication with customers
* Change Management
* Communicating, motivating and managing remote employees

**Employees will remember how organization, HR and Leadership treated them during this crisis**.