METROPOLIS COFFEE BECAME STRONGER AFTER COVID-19

In March 2020, the phones at Metropolis Coffee Company stopped ringing.

Restaurants closed. Office coffee programs disappeared almost overnight. Grabbing a cup of Joe on the way to work meant stopping in one's own kitchen.

Chicago's pandemic restrictions silenced the specialty coffee roaster's largest markets, slashing annual revenue in half. For a company built on relationships, handcrafted coffee and steady growth, the future suddenly became uncertain.

Many manufacturers survived the pandemic by waiting for business to return. Metropolis chose a different path.

"We had to kind of redo how we did business with our own staff before we decided what our strategy was going to be," said Anne Djerai, who became CEO in 2022 after joining the company as a strategic partnership manager in 2019. "We reinvigorated the culture. We promoted people from within. We built a leadership team." As Metropolis transformed itself on the inside, outside support came by way of Cook County's American Rescue Partnership Act (ARPA) grants, the North Branch Works, and the **Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center** (IMEC).

"Our decisions changed everything," said Djerai. **Metropolis Coffee** went from survival to strength.

Today, Metropolis Coffee roasts about one million pounds of coffee annually from its Avondale plant along Chicago's northwest side. The company employs about 50 people; supplies restaurants, grocery stores, and coffee shops across the country; and is a growing supplier to **Costco Wholesale Corp**. Revenue is expected to double its pre-COVID-19 revenue this year and grow 70% from where the company stood during the peak of the pandemic.

The turnaround wasn't the result of a single customer or one bold decision. It was built through hundreds of smaller ones such as investing in people, embracing continuous improvement, seeking outside expertise, and strengthening relationships throughout Chicago's North Branch industrial corridor.

> ***"Our controller, our COO, and our Vice President of sales all started in entry-level positions. We're very proud of that."***



BREWING STRONG RESILIENCE IN CHICAGO

Metropolis Coffee's story is a powerful example of what can happen when a manufacturer responds to adversity by investing in its people and its future. When COVID-19 cut the company's revenue in half, Metropolis could have focused on survival. Instead, its leadership rebuilt the company's culture, developed new leaders from within, and embraced the operational disciplines needed to support sustainable growth. Today, Metropolis is on a remarkable turnaround that reflects the commitment of its entire team.

IMEC was proud to be part of that journey. Through programs supported by American Rescue Plan Act funding, Metropolis gained access to Lean manufacturing training, value stream mapping, employee engagement resources, leadership development, and other expertise designed to strengthen its workforce and operations. Its leaders embraced the opportunity to build capabilities that will continue delivering value long after the training ended. Public investment in Illinois manufacturers should give companies the tools, knowledge, and confidence to become stronger and more competitive.

Metropolis also demonstrates why manufacturing matters beyond the factory floor. Its success supports jobs and economic activity in Chicago's North Branch industrial corridor, while contributing to the vitality of the broader community.

Cheers,

Dan Hofmann
Vice President of Finance and IT
Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center

IMEC 30 YEARS STRONG

BUILDING THE COMPANY FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Before Metropolis pursued aggressive growth, company leaders focused inward.

Using the Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS), they rebuilt their management structure, elevated employees from entry-level positions into leadership roles, and created a culture centered on accountability and continuous improvement.

"Our controller, our COO, and our vice president of sales all started in entry-level positions," Djerai said. "We're very proud of that."

Those new leaders would soon face challenges ranging from volatile green coffee markets and tariffs to rapid expansion and new customer demands.

Recognizing they needed additional manufacturing expertise, Metropolis turned to a resource many Illinois manufacturers still don't know exists.

Through **North Branch Works**, the nonprofit economic development organization serving Chicago's North Branch industrial corridor, company leaders were introduced to IMEC.

MORE THAN A CONSULTANT

For **Tom Grant**, IMEC regional manager, the first meeting with Metropolis stood out immediately.

"They were really interested in what resources were available and how to deploy them," Grant recalled. "They had focused questions, they were collaborative, and when I left their plant, I thought, 'That's a good organization.' "

Rather than recommending a single solution, IMEC worked alongside Metropolis over multiple years, helping the company identify opportunities to improve operations, strengthen leadership, and prepare the company for sustained growth.

Through **Cook County's Manufacturing Reinvented** initiative, funded by the ARPA grants, Metropolis participated in Lean manufacturing training, completed a Value Stream Mapping project, implemented employee engagement surveys, received cybersecurity assistance through the IMEC CyberSafe program, and began leadership development for frontline supervisors. Additional work involving maintenance reliability and OSHA training continues today.

"The worst thing you can do is ask employees for feedback and then do nothing with it," Grant said. "Metropolis listened. They took action. That's one of the reasons they've continued to grow."

For Djerai, IMEC became an on-demand support and advisory team.

"It's great to know your backup is there," she said. "If something's going on and you need help with it, there's a very good chance somebody at IMEC can help."

METROPOLIS COFFEE COMPANY



> ***"If something's going on and you need help with it, there's a very good chance somebody at IMEC can help."***

THE EMAIL THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

The company's biggest breakthrough arrived with a single email.

Before Metropolis could even present its products to Costco, it first had to earn Safe Quality Food (SQF) Level 2 certification, a demanding process requiring extensive preparation while the company was still rebuilding financially.

Passing the audit was only the beginning. Then came the sales presentation.

And then, one day, an email appeared.

The first Costco order. Sixty-seven pallets of coffee.

"My mouth went dry," Djerai recalled. "I turned white. I thought, Oh my God. The celebration spread throughout the company. There were definitely shots involved," she laughed.

But the victory represented far more than landing one customer.

"It really was teamwork," she said. "Operations had implemented training. Sales closed the business. Everybody had a role." Metropolis's focus on reimagining the company through the eyes of its people delivered results.

BREWING STRONGER NEIGHBORHOODS

Metropolis' impact reaches well beyond the coffee it produces.

Located along the North Branch of the Chicago River, the company has become an active participant in preserving one of the city's remaining industrial corridors.

North Branch Works has spent more than four decades helping local manufacturers, distributors, and industrial employers remain and grow in the 3.8 square mile business corridor.

"If you want a strong commercial corridor, invest in an industrial neighborhood," said Executive Director **Jonathan Snyder**. "Those manufacturing jobs create the purchasing power that builds strong neighborhoods."

The organization connects businesses with grants, workforce programs, and financing opportunities.

When Cook County launched its ARPA funding, for example, North Branch Works introduced manufacturers like Metropolis to IMEC services.

"We made that warm connection," Snyder said. "Businesses knew us. They may not have known IMEC. We helped them understand the value, and Metropolis really took it and ran with it."

Today, Djerai serves as treasurer of North Branch Works and regularly recommends IMEC to fellow manufacturers entering the corridor.

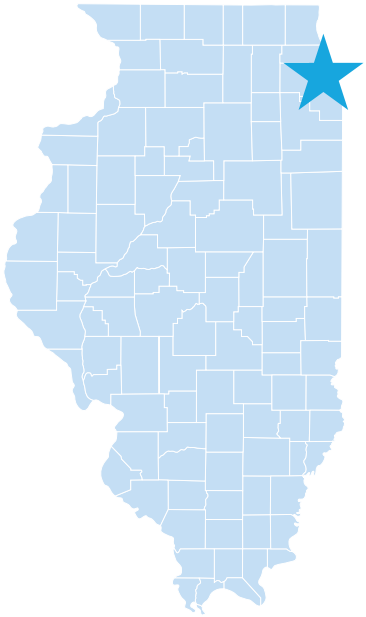
"People really don't know what's available," she said. "We didn't know."

"Metropolis listened. They took action. That's one of the reasons they've continued to grow."



METROPOLIS COFFEE

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IMEC 30 YEARS STRONG

INDUSTRY AND ENVIRONMENT STEWARDSHIP

Metropolis also demonstrates that modern industry and environmental stewardship strengthen one another.

Working alongside **Friends of the Chicago River** and neighboring manufacturers, North Branch Works supports responsible industrial growth while protecting one of Chicago's most important natural resources.

Barges continue to move materials along the river. For example, **Prairie Material** still receives sand, stone, and lightweight aggregate by barge, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Port Series. Barge transportation removes truck traffic from city streets while sharing the waterway with kayakers and recreational users.

"There is room for both," Snyder said. "Manufacturing and environmental stewardship don't have to compete."

LOOKING AHEAD

Metropolis continues investing in leadership development, expanding its relationship with Costco, building its first dedicated marketing department and digitizing resources that help independent coffee shops succeed.

For Djerai, the company's future is being built on its strengths, many of which came by way of a pivotal moment in time.

"The sky's the limit," she said. "There are even bigger things in our future."

For IMEC, Metropolis Coffee illustrates how strategic public investment, combined with committed leadership and experienced manufacturing guidance, can help Illinois manufacturers emerge stronger than before.

Sometimes the most remarkable manufacturing stories don't begin with growth. They begin with survival.

IMEC PROJECT IMPACT

LEAN TRAINING LABOR SAVINGS
$25,000

LEAN TRAINING COST AVOIDANCE
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INFORMATION SYSTEMS INVESTMENT
$25,000

70% **INCREASE IN REVENUES SINCE COVID-19**

"The sky's the limit. There are even bigger things in our future."

MADE IN MY HOMETOWN SERIES

In every Illinois hometown, manufacturing impacts families, community, state, and country – and IMEC is there. We're the first stop to taking small and midsize manufacturers from status quo to unstoppable. You bring the can-do spirit, we bring the know-how to scale your goals.

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