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An Interview With Jim Dudek

2018–2019 AIST President

By Amanda L. Blyth

How did you get started in the steel industry?

I went to school for metallurgical engineering, so steel kind of made sense. I had interviews with U. S. Steel and many other companies. I chose United States Steel and joined our quality organization. That was the first phase of my career, working in quality; I kind of “hopscoched” through the organization and was exposed more to the technical side of the business in the quality role, which was really interesting. That led to a lot of the other roles that I eventually took on.

I started in quality in the Chicago area, and then moved into the second phase of my career, which was in operations. That was mostly in the sheet division and hot rolling division in our Gary Works facility. That eventually led to moving up to Clairton, Pa., and running our Clairton coke works. That was the operating side, where you get into the day-to-day business of making steel — safety, quality, delivery, costs, all those fun things. And then I eventually moved to headquarters, where I took on roles in strategy and transformation organizations and had a broader role in the business of the United States Steel Corporation as well as the broader industry. That led to my current role, which is responsibility for our Asset Revitalization Program, our engineering program, our Centers of Excellence for quality and reliability, as well as our transformation program.



“U. S. Steel has always valued what AIST brings to the industry.”

Did you have a mentor or somebody in your career that served as a role model? What did you learn from them?

I have learned as much from people that I worked with and worked for as I do people who work for me. I've had some people who have made an impact. I think back to one of my first division managers and the simple things that they teach you — little things that stick with you, like “Don't wait for someone to tell you to do something you know is right — just go do it.” It's amazing how often people will wait to take action and it really helps to have that execution focus.

I've had a lot of leaders who put me in positions that maybe I wasn't ready for at the time, and that was really great because it helped me challenge my horizons. It also taught me the value of challenging other people to do things that are outside of their comfort zones. And it also forced me to rely on others, because if you don't have the core knowledge in a particular area yourself, you have to learn to rely on others in order to be successful.

How did you first become involved with AIST?

I was introduced to AIST through the student chapters of the predecessor organizations at the University of Illinois. My first exposure to AIST was in a classroom for a student chapter meeting. That led to my attending a conference in Nashville and then the following year in Cleveland. That was great. Being able to see the exposition, going to see technical papers and being exposed to all of that, at that pivotal point in my education, was really impactful for me and was one of the reasons I chose the steel industry.

Through the years, as a member, I also attended chapter meetings, participated in roundtables, and have spoken at dinners.

How did you get involved in a leadership capacity within AIST?

Several years ago one of our U. S. Steel leaders who was on the AIST Board of Directors was exiting the board, and U. S. Steel has always valued what AIST brings to the industry. So I was asked if I would be interested in being nominated, and that was a pretty easy decision. I said yes, and I was lucky enough that

the board accepted my nomination to join the Executive Committee.

You're the youngest incoming president AIST has had — what do you feel you bring to the table?

I don't really see age as an issue. If you look at the steel industry, from the late 1970s to the early 1980s and even into the early 1990s, there was a close-to-15-year period where there was very little hiring in the industry. I started right after that ended. I've always been one of the older young leaders, and as a result of that hiring gap, I've routinely been put in positions that people hadn't been in at that age. So that's just kind of been normal for me, and I think a lot of people who started in the steel industry around that time have had that same experience. So it has never really been a big issue for me. If you look at my background, I have been exposed to a lot of the technical side of making steel. I was fortunate enough to spend several years in the day-to-day operations, and then followed that with the broader business side — so in my short 20-plus-year career, I've had the opportunity to see all those things together, and that I think is a great strength.

And that was all at one company?

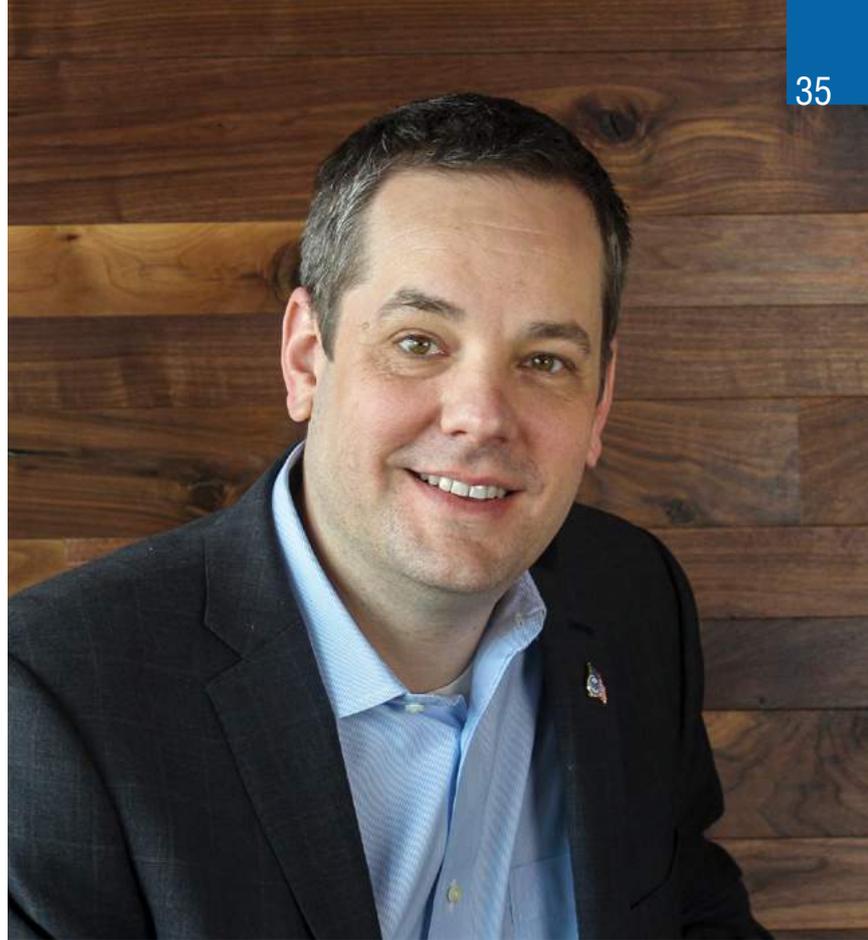
Yes, that was all with United States Steel Corporation; they have provided me with great opportunities to expand and learn throughout my career.

What do you plan to focus on during your term as AIST president?

I mentioned how my exposure to AIST brought me into the steel industry, and I think attracting talent right now is critical. At U. S. Steel, we are committed to attracting, developing, and retaining a workforce of talented and diverse people. It is an important issue; we talk about it at AIST board meetings, within the company and within the whole industry. If there is a way that I can inspire young people, as AIST inspired me, that would be really gratifying.

How would you define the value of AIST for someone just beginning their career in steel?

The first thing I'd say is you get out of it what you put into it. There is a lot of great programming; educational classes; and the annual conference, where you can hear technical presentations and go to



the exposition. If you go to those, and actually take something away from it, and then apply it when you get back to work, I think you can get great value from it.

The other side is the networking. You just don't know who it is that you're going to meet today who will come up with a great idea that you can apply — whether it's tomorrow or five years from now. Building that network of people is one of the great strengths of AIST.

What are you most looking forward to during your tenure as president?

It's the ability to be exposed to more and more people throughout the industry and see what they're doing. It's such a diverse industry and the technology is growing at a faster and faster rate and is increasingly complicated. It's really an exciting time to be in the steel industry in general.

Speaking of exciting times, we're going to switch gears: How do the Section 232 tariffs, and the potential new demand that they might create, affect U. S. Steel's Asset Revitalization Program?

When we think about demand, we evaluate what our customers' volume needs are on a routine basis. And we consider the broader economic environment, and that's how we make decisions as to which facilities will operate and how to operate them. The great thing

about the Asset Revitalization Program is that it's made up of a whole bunch of smaller projects. There are some larger projects, but it is mostly smaller projects, and those are spread across many different facilities at different physical locations across the country. So that gives us a lot of flexibility in which projects we schedule and how and when we execute those projects. Section 232 doesn't necessarily change how we execute our decision making process — we'll make our evaluation, determine what is required, and then we will decide what the right path is.

How does your company view the Section 232 exemption status moving forward?

First, we're extremely appreciative of President Trump and his support for both national security and the domestic steel industry. To us, the most important thing is that the administration meets their stated goal of increasing domestic steel production to meet 80% of operating capacity in the United States. And we feel that's the level where the industry is able to be vibrant and vital long term.

How is the restart of Granite City proceeding?

Granite City is well underway. We're focused obviously on safety first at Granite City. We've been really pleased with the response that we've gotten from the community. It's been great. We had really an

overwhelming number of people come to our job fair, and a healthy number of people we had as employees have agreed to come back, and that's really important. The key to the start-up will be our people. And anytime you restart something that's been idle for two years, you expect some level of challenges. I think the key focus for us is that we can bring it back up safely, efficiently and better than it ever has been from a long-term-competitiveness perspective. We really look forward to serving our customers from Granite City, and bringing great, high-quality jobs back to the area. ♦

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