Social distancing is the norm in the coronavirus pandemic. But AIST is drawing members together through videoconferencing.

These challenging times demand teamwork, so steel industry personnel are working closely together — but at least six feet apart. And likely farther than that, since many are working from home.

Therefore, online communication tools are taking on a new importance — and changing the way we work.

So says Brad Bray, manager of safety and plant protection at California Steel Industries in Fontana, Calif., USA.

“I’ve sat in on more teleconference meetings in the last month than I think I’ve ever done before, and we’re using them with really good success,” said Bray. “In fact, I think the meetings are very beneficial and you can get a lot done.”

Of note: he said so recently while on a webinar organized by AIST staff and members of the Safety & Health Technology Committee. The webinar, along with others that have already been held or are in the pipeline, are part of a new initiative meant to keep
AIST’s members close at a time when they have to be apart.

“The association strives to be a global leader in industry networking and education, and our primary vehicle for that has been in-person meetings and events. But as the pandemic has made face-to-face gatherings impractical, we’re adapting and looking for ways to share knowledge and foster professional connections,” said Anna Voss, AIST’s manager of technology programs.

“Webinars are another mechanism by which we can meet our mission.”

AIST launched the effort this spring, holding three COVID-19-specific webinars. The free webinars were open to all members and focused on the ways in which the pandemic is impacting specific areas of the steel industry.

In one webinar, Steel Mill Safety During COVID-19, several safety leaders discussed policies their mills have adopted to keep the workforce safe. Participants commonly spoke of barring visitors; temperature checks; mandatory telecommuting, if possible; and increased diligence in cleaning public areas.

But what to do if you’re working in a facility that you don’t control?

That’s the problem faced by Michigan-based mill services contractor Edw. C. Levy Co. To keep its employees healthy, the company has established a self-screening process.

According to Malcom Dunbar, vice president for environmental health and safety, employees each morning receive a text asking five questions:

Do you have fever of 100.4°F? Do you have a cough? Do you have shortness of breath? Have you recently been in contact with anyone with these symptoms? Have you been on a commercial airline or out of state?
If the answer is yes, to any of the questions, they are told to remain home and call a third-party medical support team, which will assess whether an employee should self-quarantine, seek medical care or report to work. “The health and safety of our workforce is of utmost importance, and having a daily self-screening process is one of many COVID-19 prevention activities,” Dunbar said.

In a separate seminar, BOF Operations and Management During COVID-19, participants detailed the impacts on their steel shops and discussed their strategies for managing through production curtailments.

Several said that although they’ve had to adjust hot metal ratios, they haven’t seen major impacts to metal chemistries. But they have had to adopt leaner ladle practices as part of an effort to conserve energy.

Some also said they were concerned about impacts to raw materials supply, but, as of the moment, those concerns hadn’t materialized.

The webinars have been particularly useful for a Technology Committee such as Oxygen Steelmaking, as its membership increasingly is rooted overseas, given the shift in process route technology in the U.S. “The webinars have provided a great platform to engage international participation from those whose daily work involves oxygen steelmaking and who want to foster technical development,” Voss said.

And in a third webinar, Steel Internships During COVID-19, recruiters and college career services officers talked about changes they’ve made to summer internship programs, which are a key recruitment tool.

A representative of one major steel producer said many of its facilities canceled summer internship programs in deference to safety, and instead are offering a guaranteed, full-time job interview for incoming seniors who had won an internship this summer. They’ve also promised an internship next summer to affected underclassmen.
“If you were good enough for us this year, you’re good enough for us next year,” he said.

Meanwhile, Steel Dynamics Inc. (SDI) is moving ahead with a revised internship program that was, at least for the first month, conducted remotely, a company representative said.

Given the explosive growth in videoconferencing apps, there’s no doubt many more of us will be working remotely more often.

“We are now adding roughly 3 million new users each day and have seen a thirty-fold increase in usage since January. There are now over 100 million daily Meet meeting participants,” Google chief executive officer Sundar Pichai said during the company’s first-quarter earnings call.

Cisco’s WebEx service, too, reported huge increases. According to the company, WebEx daily meeting volume has more than doubled since the beginning of March and expanded 2.5 times from February. At peak hours, volume is up 24 times where it would be normally, it said.

It’s widely expected that the increased use of these tools is permanent — even after the pandemic passes, videoconferences will be routine.

At AIST, members can expect to see more webinars rolled out. The association already has organized a series of webinars for this summer focusing on the steel industry’s digital transformation. AIST will also have webinars concerning direct reduced iron, project and construction management, and maintenance. Visit AIST.org/webinars for the upcoming schedule.

Voss said webinars will complement, not supplant, face-to-face meetings, which will remain a core part of AIST’s value proposition.

In the meantime, she’s asked members to reach out and suggest topics they’d like to see covered in a future webinar.

“We’re here for your benefit, so we’d love to hear your suggestions,” she said.