



AISTech[®] 2026

< Retrospective >

By Heather N. Smith

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A large crowd of people is seen from behind, looking towards a busy exhibition hall. In the background, there are various booths and banners. A large blue banner on the left reads "1600" and "THE SYSTEMS GROUP". Another banner in the center reads "group SMS group SMS". To the right, a booth has a red railing and a sign that says "SYSTEMS". The hall has a high ceiling with exposed steel beams and pipes.

For the duration of AISTech 2026, Pittsburgh once again stood at the heart of the global steel industry as thousands of steelmakers, engineers, researchers and industry leaders converged on the David L. Lawrence Convention Center.

The convention center's 124,650 square feet of exhibit space was full of activity as 652 exhibiting companies showcased the latest innovations, technologies and services shaping the future of the industry. Throughout the week, attendees explored cutting-edge solutions, formed new business relationships and exchanged ideas with colleagues from around the world.

AISTech 2026 shattered the conference's attendance record from previous years, welcoming 9,711 attendees from 39 countries. This number surpassed the previous record attendance mark by more than 1,000 and showcased the event's growing global reach and influence.

< RECORD-BREAKING! >

9,711
steel professionals

> **39**
countries

> **124**
technical sessions

➤ **537**
steel presentations

➤ **652**
exhibiting companies

➤ **124,650** sq. ft.
of exhibit space



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We drive industry

AISTech 2026
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SuperBooth

**SUPER
BOOTH**



AI-driven operational intelligence



The event's Technology Conference offered an equally impressive program, drawing 2,361 attendees and featuring 124 technical sessions and 537 technical presentations. Throughout the week, experts from across the industry came together to share research, operational insights and emerging technologies.

AIST extends its gratitude to AISTech 2026's premier sponsor, The Systems Group, and global sponsors SuperBooth, Morgan Engineering and TMEIC for their continued support in making this record-breaking event possible.



Investing in the Future of the Industry

The conference officially got underway on Sunday, 3 May, with the sold-out AIST Foundation Golf Classic at Quicksilver Golf Club. Beginning bright and early, 144 golfers went to the course in support of the next generation of steel industry professionals. The event raised funds for scholarships and academic grants, helping students pursue careers across the steel industry.

The focus on professional development continued throughout the afternoon with the return of both the Women in Steel Development Program and the Young Professionals Development Program, two initiatives launched to strengthen leadership and career growth opportunities within the industry.

The Women in Steel Development Program featured sessions focused on professional advancement, wins worth celebrating and personal growth, guided by members of the Women in Steel Committee. The first presentation, “Reflections on Success and Strength: Conversations That Inspire,” acted as an interactive small group forum which encouraged attendees to





reflect on their careers. One discussion focused on accomplishments while the other explored lessons learned.

In the second program, “Fireside Chat With Melissa Doman: Personalizing How You Navigate Change,” attendees explored strategies for managing workplace transitions, embracing





Winning team from Young Professional Innovation Challenge (L-R): Steve Schriver, ABB; Tristan Wrable, InfoSight Corp.; Sophia Calandra, Nucor Steel–Hertford County; Keith Kocher, Vollmer America Inc.; Matheus Balen, SMS group Inc.; and Ruthuparna Kemparaju, Virginia Tech.

change and building resilience in constantly evolving professional environments.

At the same time, the Young Professionals Development Program provided early-career attendees with interactive sessions designed to assist in navigating their careers in the steel industry. The program included workshops focused on professional growth and leadership development, highlighted by an interactive session titled “Get On the Bull: Navigating the Line Between Grit & Burnout,” which encouraged participants to build resilience, stay focused and thrive both inside and outside of work.

In the second presentation, “Young Professional Innovation Challenge,” emerging leaders from across the industry worked in small groups to address workplace issues affecting early-career professionals. Teams were tasked with developing innovative solutions to strengthen engagement, retention and professional development within the industry. They then presented their ideas directly to members of AIST’s Board of Directors.

The winning team — consisting of Matheus Balen, Sophia Calandra, Keith Kocher, Tristan Wrable, Steve Schriver and Ruthu Kemparaju — earned

the opportunity to have their concept published in *Iron & Steel Technology* magazine.

Responding to the challenge prompt, “What is one change that could meaningfully improve the industry workplace for young professionals?” the team’s proposal included expanding traditional company-specific training into an industrywide systems immersion experience.

Their concept would allow young professionals to follow a steel mill project from initial concept through commissioning, providing firsthand exposure to the entire network of producers, original equipment manufacturers, electrical suppliers, contractors and system integrators involved in major capital projects.

By helping young professionals understand how the industry functions as an interconnected system, the team argued the program could help bridge common early-career knowledge gaps, strengthen cross-functional collaboration and foster deeper, long-term engagement with the steel industry.





Technology Conference

Monday morning marked the official start of the Technology Conference with the J. Keith Brimacombe Memorial and AIME Keynote Lecture, delivered by Pinakin Chhabal, vice president and chief technology officer at ArcelorMittal.

The Brimacombe Memorial honors the legacy of Keith Brimacombe, a pioneering figure in process metallurgy whose influence extended across the global steel community through leadership roles with the Canadian Institute of Mining, Metallurgy and Petroleum; The Minerals, Metals & Materials Society; and AIST's predecessor, the Iron & Steel Society.

This year's lecture, titled "From Pilot to Plant — Scaling Innovation for Industrial Impact in Steel Production," explored one of the industry's most persistent challenges: transforming up-and-coming



technologies into reliable, large-scale industrial solutions.

Rather than viewing scale solely as a measure of production volume, Chaubal urged attendees to consider the broader challenge of managing system-level risk. He introduced a framework — consisting of scale-up, scale-deep and scale-out — emphasizing that successful innovation requires technologies to evolve beyond pilot demonstrations and into repeatable, dependable industrial processes.

“A real measure of success of innovation, of industrialization, is not just based on invention speed, not how fast we get there, but really how fast organizations industrialize learning relative to uncertainty,” Chaubal said.

Central to his presentation was the concept of the “missing middle,” the often-overlooked

stage between a successful pilot project and widespread commercialization. According to Chaubal, many organizations struggle in this phase, where technical feasibility must be translated into operational reliability, financial viability and organizational commitment.

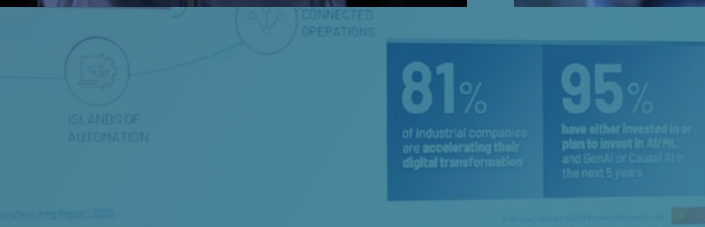
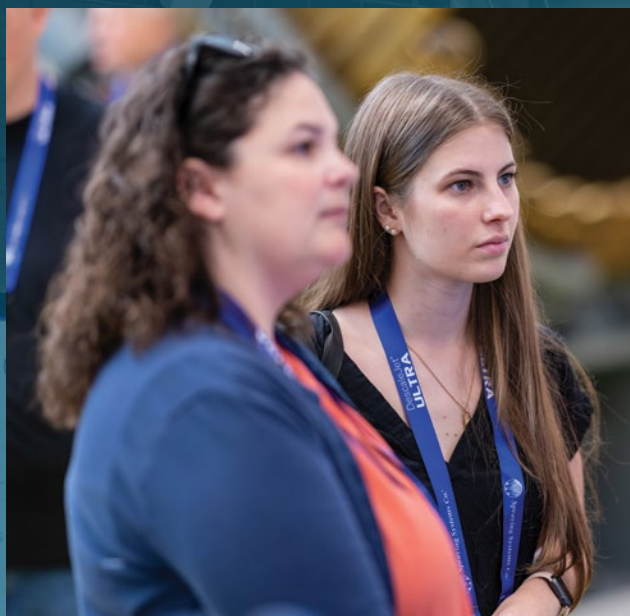
To overcome these obstacles, he advocated for a shift in mindset centered on adaptability, modular design and the use of digital twins to identify risks before they become costly obstacles. Successful industrialization, he argued, is not only a technical challenge but an organizational one, requiring cross-functional collaboration, sustained investment and strong leadership to bring transformative ideas to full-scale implementation.

An interview with Pinakin Chaubal appears on pages 84–85 of this issue.



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— Pinakin Chaubal, ArcelorMittal



“The amount of technical content that is shared by so many people around the world is immense.”

— Malavikha Rajivmoorthy, Cleveland-Cliffs Research & Innovation Center



Following the keynote, the Technology Conference continued throughout the week with hundreds of presentations, panel discussions and technical exchanges covering every aspect of modern steelmaking. From ironmaking and steel production to automation, sustainability and emerging technologies, attendees had access to a wide array of knowledge sharing and professional development opportunities.

For many participants, the depth of technical content was one of the conference's biggest strengths.

"The amount of technical content that is shared by so many people around the world is immense," said Malavikha Rajivmoorthy of the Cleveland-Cliffs Research & Innovation Center. "The amount of information that I'm carrying with me going back is insane. Even after attending just a couple of sessions and listening to all of those presentations, I think I'm going back with so much knowledge."

This experience was similar for other attendees, many of whom went home with new ideas, new connections and a renewed perspective on the technologies shaping the future of the industry.

"The greatest benefit for me is just seeing young talent be able to present on very technical subjects — very inspiring as a young professional," said Raven Barker from Nucor Steel Louisiana LLC.





President's Award Breakfast

Tuesday morning brought together thousands of steel professionals as 2025–2026 AIST President Al Behr presented several awards, including the 2026 Steelmaker of the Year, at the President's Award Breakfast.

The event opened with a special appearance from Pittsburgh Mayor Corey O'Connor.

"It's a proud honor that we have you here today because as most of you know, we are the Steel City," O'Connor said to the audience. "Steel built this city; it built the bridges, it built the skyscrapers, it built our neighborhoods, it built our work ethic that we are so proud of."

He went on to say that Pittsburgh is primed to be a world leader in innovations within the industry including AI, robotics and the new wave of steel.

Prior to handing out the awards, Behr called on those gathered to reflect on what drew individuals to the steel industry and what inspired them to stay. He explained that everyone had a reason, with his own being his family; his family reminds him that everyone has their own reason to remain safe and return home, making safety paramount.

Behr went on to say that others' "why" might be different: because steel is essential, it improves





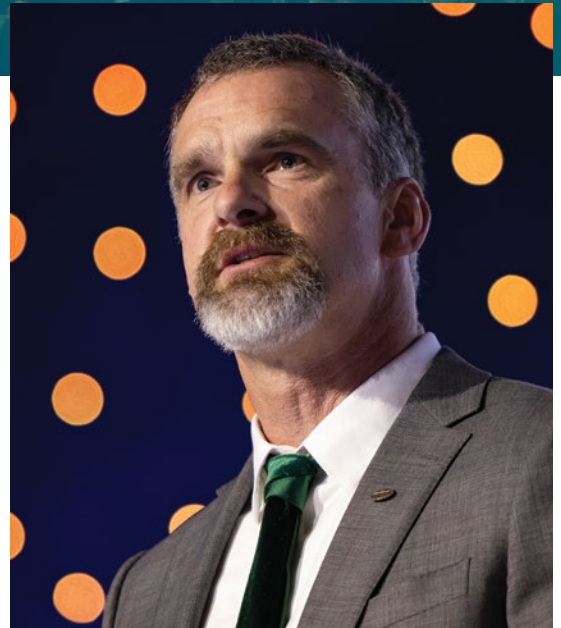
“Steel built this city ... it built our work ethic that we are so proud of.”

— Pittsburgh Mayor Corey O'Connor

the quality of life, it powers economies, it's global and constantly evolving, to name a few. He said AIST's "why" is to serve those within the global steel community.

“Steel makes the future possible,” Behr said.

Behr acknowledged Bernie Fedak's recent US\$250,000 donation to AIST, the largest individual donation in the association's history. In recognition, AIST created the Bernie J. Fedak Project Management Excellence Fund to advance training, support talent and recognize excellence within the industry.



“The steel industry is more than a business; it’s a community.”

— Al Behr, 2025–2026 AIST President

“The steel industry is more than a business; it’s a community. It’s a community of remarkable people who challenge, support and inspire one another,” Behr said.

The award breakfast culminated with the presentation of the 2026 Steelmaker of the Year Award to Leon J. Topalian, chair and chief executive officer of Nucor Corp. This was the second time Topalian has received AIST’s highest honor in his career.

In his acceptance speech, Topalian called the conference “a cornerstone of our industry,” emphasizing that the award belonged to Nucor’s entire workforce.

“This award doesn’t belong to me,” Topalian said. “It belongs to our 33,000 men and women who call Nucor home, who show up every day

with dedication and an unwavering commitment to excellence.”

Throughout his speech, Topalian underlined that the steel industry’s greatest strength is not found in equipment or production capacity, but in the people who drive it forward.

“Steel is not just what we make. Steel is who we are,” he said. “It is strength under pressure. It is resilience in uncertainty.”

He attributed the industry’s resilience to a culture rooted in safety, performance and accountability rather than scale alone, noting that Nucor’s strength comes from its willingness to invest during uncertainty and continue innovating when market conditions are challenging.

See all of the Board of Directors Award winners on pages 94–100.





The audience was surprised with a short video from U.S. President Donald Trump, who expressed his congratulations to Topalian for receiving the 2026 Steelmaker of the Year Award. Following Trump's opening remarks, Topalian delivered the William T. Hogan, S.J. Memorial Lecture.

In his lecture, "The Advanced Age of American Steel," Topalian reflected on the steel industry's evolution, pointing to both the cultural foundations and future direction of American steelmaking as an important cornerstone of modern society.

Topalian also shared his philosophy on leadership, describing it as a collaborative effort. Effective leaders, he said, work alongside their teams, listen carefully and create opportunities for others to succeed.

"I've learned that leadership in our industry is not about standing in front," he said. "It's about standing alongside. It's about listening more than speaking. It's about empowering rather than directing."

Looking toward the future, Topalian expressed confidence in both the steel industry and American manufacturing. He predicted that the next generation of steelmaking would be increasingly advanced, sustainable and resilient, positioning the industry to play a vital role in an evolving world.



“We believe the next generation of steelmaking will be smarter, cleaner, safer and more resilient than ever before,” Topalian said. “We believe that American manufacturing is entering a new era of opportunity.”

Addressing policy, Topalian expressed appreciation for Trump and his administration’s attention to the steel sector, crediting their trade actions and emphasis on domestic production for the industry’s current momentum. He described the relationship as unusually strong compared to past administrations, highlighting support in combating unfairly traded imports.

You can read the full transcript of Topalian’s lecture on pages 86–92.

Town Hall Forum

The final plenary session, AIST’s Town Hall Forum, took place the following day. This year, five panelists came together to discuss the North American steel market’s strength and resilience in the face of uncertainty. Some other challenges confronting steel producers include overcapacity, artificial intelligence, green electricity and evolving trade relationships.

The panelists included Paul Lawrence of CMC, Kevin Lewis of United States Steel Corporation, Douglas Matthews of Orion Steel, Jack Sullivan of Nucor Corp. and Kristopher Westbrooks of Metallus.



The forum was chaired by George Koenig of Hatch and moderated by KDKA-TV (CBS)'s Jon Delano (retired).

In his 17th year serving as the moderator of AISTech, Delano called the forum one of the steel industry's signature events: a chance to hear the candid commentary of real insiders. He then went on to introduce the year's theme, "Steel 2026: Drafting Our Future."

Turning to the panelists, Delano brought up the question of what the future of the industry would look like. In light of this, he asked each panelist to provide one word to describe the current North American steel industry. The words chosen included: dynamic, rebirth, inflection, microcosm and healthy.

After the opening, the panel delved into topics including the industry's resilience through capital investment, trade policy and energy management, and the transformative role of technology and talent. The energy-intensive demand of data centers was also touched on, emphasizing the need for grid innovation and a new generation of leaders comfortable with emerging technologies.

The panelists went on to explain that despite global uncertainties, the companies they represent are positioned for long-term growth through capital allocation and operational efficiency.

"The companies that position themselves to be nimble, to be flexible, to take advantage of changes that are occurring on almost a weekly, monthly basis and position themselves to come out better on the other side can actually make it a dynamic market," Matthews explained.

You can read a full synopsis of the Town Hall Forum on pages 102-111. All three plenary sessions are also available in full on AIST's YouTube channel.





AIST Board of Directors Meeting

The 2025–2026 AIST Board of Directors came together later that day to review association business and discuss several strategic initiatives which will impact both the future of the organization and the industry.

Meeting in person twice a year, the board consists of 29 directors. This includes 10 officers, the president, representatives from AIST's nine Technology Divisions and representatives from nine AIST Member Chapters. Incoming directors for the 2026–2027 term were also in attendance.

Three major topics were discussed during the meeting: improving the public



A group of people at an AISTECH 2026 event, with a quote overlay.

“I recommend it to everybody on my team to come to these shows.”

— Stephen Murphy, Metallus

perception of steel, trade school outreach and technical content discoverability.

To strengthen public perception of the steel industry, AIST announced plans for a new digital marketing campaign designed to modernize the industry’s image and attract the next generation of talent. By focusing on the human side of innovation and demonstrating how steel advancements improve everyday life, the campaign aims to make the industry more relatable and engaging. Working alongside a professional marketing firm, participating companies will produce a series of short videos set in their facilities. Together, these stories will create a unified industry message that showcases steel’s impact, innovation and opportunities through a single, unified voice.

The board also received an update on AIST’s workforce development efforts through its U.S. Department of Energy-funded Steel to Students:

Trade School Outreach initiative. Launched in September 2025 as part of the Industrial Systems Energy Efficiency Development (ISEED) Collaborative, it was created to address ongoing labor shortages while raising awareness of skilled trade opportunities.

The program provides manufacturing camps, trade school scholarships, educational outreach and training at AISTech and AIST conferences and development of HR recruitment toolkits.

Finally, the board also reviewed progress on the technical content discoverability initiative launched in April 2025 to enhance the visibility and academic impact of AIST technical publications. The effort focuses on improving indexing, digital publishing tools and peer review workflows to increase accessibility while protecting intellectual property and member value.





The Heart of the Steel Industry

As the conference reached its final day, the energy on the exposition floor remained at an all-time high. Conversations lingered in the aisles, business cards changed hands one last time and attendees met for discussions that had begun earlier in the week and would continue long after they returned home.

The exposition floor was more than a showcase of equipment and technology; it served as a meeting place where decades-long partnerships were renewed, new collaborations were formed and ideas evolved into practical discussions about implementation. For many attendees, one of the greatest values of AISTech was the opportunity to bring the industry's producers, suppliers, engineers and innovators together under one roof.

"You can get so much work done during the week, having multiple meetings with really all the main suppliers you deal with and learning about new technology and getting in a continuous proof of mindset. I recommend it to everybody on my team to come to these shows!" said Stephen Murphy from Metallus.

Others shared similar sentiments.

"This is our big annual event every year. For one, it's a lot of longstanding customers and suppliers that we see every year. It's really exciting to catch up with them, see what technologies they're working on, new projects, and also just seeing how the industry is being pushed forward," said Casey Cummins from Columbus McKinnon Corp.

For international exhibitors, the event offered access to North America's steel community. "The biggest benefit is exchanging [information] with top players in the steel industry in the North American market," noted Tom Beyer of Cunova GmbH, while his colleague Daniel Kellermeier emphasized the opportunity to showcase innovative products to customers and partners from around the globe.

Even amid all the excitement of the exposition, AISTech never lost sight of its sense of community. In true Pittsburgh fashion, several beloved hometown mascots made appearances throughout





the week, delighting attendees as they wandered the exposition floor and offered pictures with exhibitors and attendees alike.

Steel industry professionals found themselves sharing the aisles with Steely McBeam of the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Pittsburgh Pirates' parrot and Jalapeño Hanna of the Great Pittsburgh Pierogi Race. Their appearances added something distinctly Pittsburgh to the event and served as a reminder that, while steelmaking is a global industry, Pittsburgh remains one of its center points.

Throughout the week, attendees were encouraged to participate in several games set up around the exhibit floor. One lucky attendee went home with a brand-new Chevy™ Silverado after winning the conference's annual truck giveaway.





Still processing the moment, the winner, Pittsburgh native Mike Krupitzer from Busch Vacuum Solutions, exclaimed, “I don’t have any words right now — it’s amazing! I never thought it’d happen, it’s a total shock!”



Even after the exposition concluded, the learning opportunities continued. Early Thursday morning, attendees were offered a series of plant tours that provided a firsthand look at modern steelmaking operations. The tours offered included Ellwood Quality Steels Co.’s remelt facility; TenarisKoppel; Cleveland-Cliffs Butler Works; and the Carrie Furnaces.

As attendees returned home, they left with new ideas, strengthened relationships and a clearer vision of where the industry is headed. ♦

