



2024 Women in Steel Conference Recap

by Emily Williams

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The second annual Women in Steel Conference was held 16–18 September 2024 in Pittsburgh, Pa., USA, at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center. Over two days, attendees heard from presenters who covered topics from impostor syndrome and burnout to being the only woman in the room and how to navigate it.

The conference kicked off on Monday with optional Professional Development Workshops which were tailored to address diverse needs and aspirations of the attendees. There were four separate sessions hosted by Rahul Dogra,

Vision to Market Ltd.; Alison Grizzle, founder/president, Clearview Strategy Partners; Jamie Lewis Smith, chief executive officer and leadership and organization development psychologist, Pixel Leadership Group; and Gerry Burns, conscious leadership coach.

The day concluded with a reception on the rooftop of the convention center where conference attendees had the opportunity to socialize, network and take in the sights of the city.



AIST.org/WISconference



(L-R) Sushma Walker, Nucor Business Technology; Katherine Miller, Nucor Corp.; April Pitts-Baggett, Nucor Business Technology; Kelly Dallas, Cleveland-Cliffs Inc.

Tuesday morning began with a welcome and opening remarks to the sold-out crowd of 509 from Stacy Varnecky, general manager — sales & marketing, AIST, where she provided an update on AIST’s Women in Steel initiative, which began in 2018.

“The future of our industry requires a broader skillset to adapt to new technologies and evolving workplace dynamics,” she said. “Given these challenges, it’s vital to address the representation of women within our industry and women within the workforce.”

Varnecky shared some statistics of women in the workforce as well as women in technical industries and the differences in representation. The overall workforce in the U.S. is made up of 46.7% women, while AIST’s membership is made up of only 11.5% women. She stressed the importance of initiatives like Women in Steel, as it has shown to be imperative. From 2018 to 2023, AIST’s female membership surged 96% since deploying resources to women in the industry.

“We expect an even greater year-on-year growth by the end of 2024, bolstered by the support of this conference and engagement,” Varnecky said. “These positive trends underscore the importance of women seeing and supporting each other in the industry.”

She also shared updates and progress since the first Women in Steel Conference in 2023. A Women in Steel Standing Committee has been formed and approved by the AIST Board of Directors. The committee will focus on developing programs for women and other underrepresented groups in alignment with AIST’s mission.





Stacy Varnecky, Association
for Iron & Steel Technology



(L-R) Karin Lund, G-Power Global Enterprises LLC,
and Sushma Walker, Nucor Business Technology

The first session of the conference was an interview by Karin Lund, chief executive officer and founder, G-Power Global Enterprises LLC, with Sushma Walker, president, Nucor Business Technology.

Walker discussed how she got started in the industry, her career path and being a minority in a male-dominated field. She also shared her beginnings in IT, how it led her to the steel industry and the hard work she had to do along the way.

"I am the product of someone saying you can do more," she said. Walker took the time at the end of her interview to address the crowd directly.

"Many of you in the room are for the first time holding roles that were typically held by men in the industry. You are turning a path, and that's a huge responsibility," Walker said. "There are jobs here today that didn't even exist five, ten years ago. Think about what the next five, ten, fifteen years bring. I love the fact that most of the

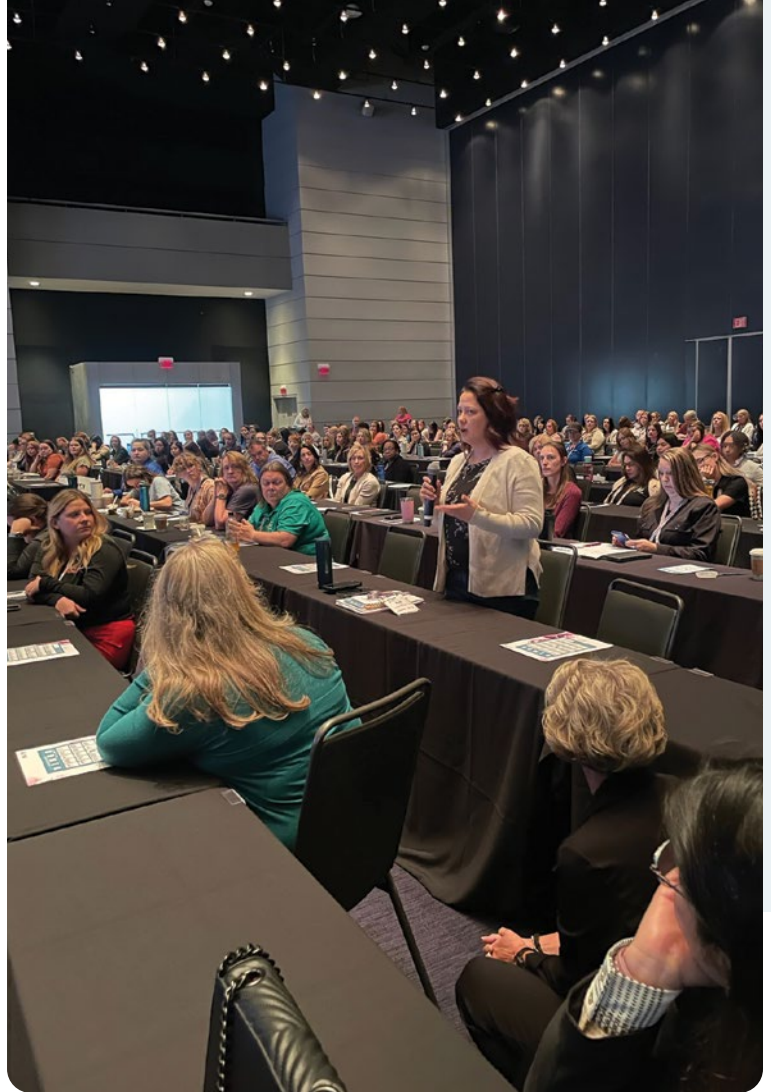


(L-R) Sabrina Saunders Mosby, Vibrant Pittsburgh; Lisa Marcuzzi, ArcelorMittal Dofasco G.P.; Mona Dine, United States Steel Corporation; Ashley McMahon, SMS group Inc.; and Brenda Petrilena, United States Steel Corporation

women (who are members of AIST) are 35 and under. Think about the influence and the impact you get to make. That is an awesome responsibility.”

She also encouraged attendees — specifically the 5% of those who were men — to take back what they learn during the conference to not only their companies, but to their coworkers and especially the women they work with, to fight for more representation and the opportunities everyone should be afforded.

At the conclusion of Walker’s interview, the inaugural MaryEmily Slate Trailblazer Award was awarded posthumously to MaryEmily Slate of Nucor Corp. This award aims to recognize a female who exemplifies resilience and determination, while laying the foundation for women to succeed in the steel industry where they account for less than one-third of the workforce. It was named in honor of MaryEmily, whose impact on Nucor Corp., women in manufacturing, and the industry at large was characterized by her authentic leadership, compassion and prioritization of teamwork.



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“It was amazing to see and understand some of the challenges women face in this profession and it was wonderful to have a conference dedicated to women and how they can advance their careers.”

The next session was a panel discussion titled “I Wish I Knew Then What I Know Now” moderated by Rachel Schmidt, technical sales manager — EAF Mill Services, Berry Metal Co.

The discussion centered around the panelists’ beginnings in their careers and the challenges of being a young woman in an industry where they would be the minority.

Amy Woods, galvanized product metallurgist, Steel Dynamics Inc. – Flat Roll Group Butler Division, was a panelist and she shared a piece of advice on something that she was glad she did early on in her career and encouraged others to do the same.



Carol Jackson, HarbisonWalker International

“Something that I think I did well early in my career was learning when to say yes to roles even if they fell outside my education or fell outside my experiences, especially if I felt like it would teach me a new experience or let me talk to new people and learn aspects of a business I wasn’t yet familiar with,” she said. “So, saying yes to things that were scary — that was a great decision that I made early on in my career.”



(L-R) Alacyia Fields, Nucor Steel Lexington; Sofia Geronimo, Cleveland-Cliffs IronUnits LLC; Nicole Sweet, RHI Magnesita; and April Pitts-Baggett, Nucor Business Technology



The final panel discussion of the day, called “Boots on the Ground: How Women Are Paving the Way in Operations,” was moderated by April Pitts-Baggett, senior quality engineer, Nucor Business Technology. This session highlighted the challenges that women face in those heavily male-dominated roles within the steel mills. Additionally, these panelists spoke to their successes and provided encouragement to others in the audience without college degrees.

Panelists talked about the importance of not being worried about being the only woman on the shop floor and how to be confident about where you are and what you know.

“I wanted to be a voice in the room for those coming behind me,” said Nicole Sweet, head of end-to-end recycling — North America, RHI Magnesita. With

17 years of experience, she emphasized advocating for yourself and learning from other women in the industry.

The first day of the conference concluded with two presentations. Michael Annichine, chief executive officer, Magee-Women’s Health Research Institute and Foundation, discussed the progress of women’s clinical research and the importance of standing up for one’s own health in a presentation titled “The State of Women’s Health Research — Past, Present and Future.” The last presentation was given by Rahul Dogra, titled “Leveraging Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace” where he highlighted soft skills and how they are an essential part of day-to-day business.



Rahul Dogra, Vision to Market Ltd.

The second and last day of the conference began with a presentation from Carol R. Jackson, independent board member, Sensient Technologies Corp. and AZZ Inc.; former president, chairman and chief executive officer, HarbisonWalker International, titled “Putting It All Together: Blossoming Into the Flower of Steel You Were Meant To Be.” Jackson discussed the importance of knowing who you are, cultivating your reputation and how burnout is not the badge of honor it is portrayed as by many.

A panel moderated by Brenda Petrilena, senior director, Global Decarbonization & Program Management, United States Steel Corporation, titled “Improving Workplace Climate With Employee Resource Groups,” finished the morning. Panelists talked about employee resource groups and how vital they are to engaging employees and creating community.

After lunch, attendees got up to dance and “shake it off” during an interactive presentation from Jamie Lewis Smith, focused on burnout titled “Combating Stress and Burnout.”

Smith identified the symptoms of burnout and shared with attendees that 74% of women are burnt out and that women who work in male-dominated industries have higher stress levels than those who don’t. She shared tips on how to discover if you have burnout and how to address it.



Jamie Lewis Smith,
Pixel Leadership Group

*“The future of our industry
requires a broader
skillset to adapt to new
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Traci Forrester,
Cleveland-Cliffs Inc.

“Don’t let guilt, perfectionism, fear of failure (or) lack of confidence, hold you back from being the awesome person that you are...Because remember, you can overcome stress and burnout because you can’t break a woman made of steel.”

Smith left the attendees with this closing sentiment: “Don’t let guilt, perfectionism, fear of failure (or) lack of confidence, hold you back from being the awesome person that you are...Because remember, you can overcome stress and burnout because you can’t break a woman made of steel.”

Traci Forrester, executive vice president, Environmental & Sustainability, Cleveland-Cliffs Inc., spoke to the attendees next, where she talked about her career and experiences she has had on her path to her newly created executive role in 2021.

In answering questions from the audience, an attendee asked for her feelings about taking a position that didn’t exist before and how she navigated the situation. She said, “I was scared; there was a lot of self-doubt, but I was given this role for a reason and I’m going to do it.”

The 2024 Women in Steel Conference concluded with a presentation “Confidence Is NOT Rocket Science: Breaking the Grip of Impostor Syndrome,” by Maureen Zappala, keynote speaker and author. Zappala shared her own encounters with impostor syndrome in her career and that it’s not uncommon. She asked the audience to remember their first, “grown up” job and how uncomfortable it felt.



Maureen Zappala,
Keynote Speaker, Author,
and Presentation Coach



In recounting a time where she felt a wave of impostor syndrome early in her career at NASA, she said to the audience: “I wasn’t afraid of failing, I was afraid of trying something new.”

Attendees were left with excitement and tools they can take back to their organizations to help other women in the industry grow.

“I think it’s a great conference. It was amazing to see and understand some of the challenges women face in this profession and it was wonderful to have a conference dedicated to women and how they can advance their careers,” said Michael Grant of Fero Labs, who also attended Women in Steel Conference in 2023.

AIST will hold its 3rd Women in Steel Conference in the fall of 2025. Details are currently being finalized and will be released to the membership once available.

AIST thanks the premier event sponsor, Nucor Corp., event sponsors Algoma Steel Inc., Carpenter Technology Corp., and RHI Magnesita, as well as all other sponsors and exhibitors for their contributions and support. ♦

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