



How did you become interested in the steel industry?

Well, I can assure you that it had nothing to do with any type of steelmaking family lineage, as no other Toners ever worked in the steel business. But I do come from a blue-collar family, so when I finally did get out in the mills and in the business, I felt like I could relate to the hourly employees out there doing the work.

I grew up in Prospect Park, Pa., USA, right outside of Philadelphia. During my final semester at the University of Delaware, several local corporations participated in a job fair on campus. One of those companies was Phoenix

Steel Corp., a plate producer just 20 minutes south of my home. All those years living there, I didn't even know it existed. I took an on-site interview and when someone mentioned refractories, I couldn't even spell the word let alone know what it meant. That's just how green I was coming into the business. They offered me a position and I went through what was called the "loop program," where you rotate through a number of different departments and functions. When I got to the electric arc furnace, with the noise and the sparks and the liquid steel, I caught the bug and said I'd like to start there.

► An Interview With Thomas C. Toner

2024–2025 AIST President

Thomas C. Toner, vice president of operations for SSAB Americas, stepped into the role of AIST president for 2024–2025 during AISTech last month. *Iron & Steel Technology* caught up with him to talk about his career in the steel industry, and his goals for AIST this coming year.

Toner joined SSAB (formerly IPSCO) in 1998 as meltshop manager at the company's mill in Montpelier, Iowa, USA. In 2006, he was named superintendent of Primary Operations, and given the added responsibility of being team leader for the Northern Business Unit (NBU), accountable for the financial performance of the NBU production facilities consisting of the Montpelier, Iowa, operations, and cut-to-length line facilities in Minnesota and Ontario in 2012. He was general manager of SSAB's Iowa operations from 2015 through 2017. Today as vice president of Operations, he has leadership responsibility for all operational activities at SSAB's North American steel plant, including safety, productivity, cost control and quality. In addition, in March 2022 he was appointed as a member of the Transformation Office team (Stockholm, Sweden).

Toner holds a bachelor's degree in business administration (with a concentration in operations management) from the University of Delaware. He is also a graduate of the Strategic Metals Management Program, Olin Graduate School of Business, Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., USA.

SSAB

by Amanda L. Woods

I started in the meltshop as a junior melter, and from that point I spent most of my career in primary operations.

What were you studying at the University of Delaware?

My degree is in business administration with a concentration in operations management.

Did you have any notions of what you wanted to do with that degree?

All I knew was I didn't want a job sitting behind a desk all day, and I related to an hourly position mentality. I always thought that maybe I'd have a shot at being a supervisor or a frontline supervisor. I was 22 years old, and had a senior melter watching over my shoulder, since I had no clue what I was doing. If you wanted to take responsibility and learn quickly, the company encouraged you to do that.

It sounds like the steel industry was a good fit for what you wanted to get into.

I was the first Toner to go to college, and I was also the first Toner in the steel industry. The steel industry was a good match — obviously, since I’m still here over 40 years later. My entire career has been in steel, and I’m excited that now my son is in a field related to the steel industry. I hope when he tells his story one day, he can talk about the Toner family’s lineage in this industry.

Have you had mentors who have helped guide you in your career?

Yes, I’ve worked for several steel companies over the years and there have been many mentors and positive influences. In my early days, there was Chris Sperber and Mike O’Neil. Chris was the meltshop superintendent at Phoenix Steel in Claymont, Del., USA. As a young steelmaker I thought the meltshop superintendent all but walked on water. Chris was never above spending time in the shop, and always greeted employees with a “hello” or “good morning.” Mike was the meltshop superintendent

during my years at Carpenter Technology in Reading, Pa., USA, and he was an example of the tireless, hard work that a steel mill requires. Mike exposed me to my first Electric Arc Furnace Conference in Pittsburgh in the mid-1980s.

More recently, both Jeff Moskaluk and Chuck Schmitt here at SSAB have had a huge impact on my professional development and career. Jeff gave me the opportunity to become the Northern Business Unit team leader at Montpelier and our cut-to-length lines. This exposed me to and taught me about aspects of the business that I had no experience in, like the commercial side of the business. Chuck has shown a level of determination and compassion for employees I’ve never been exposed to.

I’m not sure where I would be today without the help and guidance from so many over the years.

How have you seen the industry change over the course of your career?

The first major change that comes to mind is safety. I get chills when I think back to some of the safety practices and safety attitudes that were the norm when I first got



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into this business. We have come such a long way. I have seen firsthand the positive changes and commitment to safety culture and safety performance at SSAB, and in the entire steel industry — and it shows in our results. But like I always say, safety is work that is never done and we must keep safety in the forefront each and every day; and we still improve so every employee goes home in the same condition that they arrived at work.

Also, the level of automation and digitalization to our equipment and processes has greatly developed and improved. This can be seen in increased equipment reliability; therefore productivity and tighter process control is leading to improved product quality.

Last but not least is the steel industry's decarbonization efforts toward fossil-free steel production. If you asked me 15 years ago if the steel industry could take on this challenge, I would have said no. I am very proud of the progress and achievements SSAB has made in our HYBRIT DRI technology and producing SSAB Zero steel at the Montpelier, Iowa, USA, facility.

Let's talk more about SSAB's decarbonization efforts, which includes fossil-free steel. How has that impacted its Americas division?

In March 2023, SSAB launched the first fossil carbon emission-free steel of its kind called SSAB Zero. The emissions are so small that we guarantee that they are less than 0.05 kg CO₂e emissions per kg of steel and thus rounded to 0.0, which is our target. SSAB Zero is produced exclusively at SSAB Iowa and is manufactured using 100% recycled scrap and is melted using fossil-free electricity.

Modifications have been made to our natural gas distribution system to allow for the consumption of biogas during the production of SSAB Zero. Biocarbon is used in the place of both charge carbon and injection carbon at the electric arc furnace. Another highlight has been our ability to melt HYBRIT DRI in our AC electric arc furnace at our SSAB Alabama facility in Mobile, Ala., USA.





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How did you become involved in AIST, and how has AIST membership benefited you and your company?

Like I mentioned earlier, it was Mike O’Neil who encouraged me and took me to my first conference. From that first experience, it became very evident the resources through AIST could offer value to me and my colleagues, who were young, up-and-coming steel mill operators.

I see so many benefits of being involved with AIST. One that comes to mine first is networking. There has not been another organization that can offer the ability to develop so many contacts and relationships so quickly. For me, it has been invaluable to pick up the phone and reach out to other steelmakers and get their opinion and recommendations when dealing with operating issues. SSAB sees the value in AIST and has been very supportive and engaged. We encourage our employees to become members, and attend and participate in as many of the various activities offered as possible. Steelmakers run very lean organizations and the training offered through AIST has been a great resource for us to get our young professionals active and engaged as soon as they enter our industry. I see the exposition hall at AISTech with the latest and greatest supplier equipment offerings, and along with the technical papers presented, as a very efficient way to keep up with the latest developments in our industry. I envision SSAB staying involved and active with AIST far into the future.

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

I’ve been actively involved with the AIST Executive Committee activities since 2018. During that time, it has

become evident to me that Ron Ashburn and his team run a very professional, well-managed, efficient organization, so there are certainly no immediate pain points that need attention.

As a collaborative organization, decarbonization of the steel production process remains among our top technical priorities. As a knowledge center for the global steel industry, I want AIST to facilitate the best, most informed thinking among all stakeholders. This includes steel producers, technology and service providers, government, academia, and the public. Decarbonization is a shared problem, and we can only solve it by working together.

I consider the needs and wants of the membership — both producers and suppliers — to be our most important focus. Without members, we have no association. Continuous improvement of programs, conferences and activities that AIST offers should be in the forefront to assure the organization’s long-term sustainability and viability. If the membership continues to see value in AIST participation, AIST’s future successes will be ensured.

I want to talk with our members and make sure they feel they’re getting value out of their dues and their involvement in the organization. I also want to know what our members are doing to entice more young professionals to join the steel industry.

To that end, what is SSAB doing to entice young professionals to join the steel industry?

This is an important topic to not only our industry but also for all of manufacturing for many years. We have been lucky to have second- and third-generation



employees working with us at SSAB. We take such pride that they see us as a good and safe employer.

We're also working on some new programs to recruit top talent at SSAB. We have developed several new efforts to attract the best and brightest young talent. Our newly developed apprentice program focuses on both mechanical and electrical trades. We've had a tough time in the past recruiting in these two areas, and we're committed to changing that. Today potential apprentice candidates are identified through several different methods, including social media, billboards, job fairs, word of mouth, high school and college campus visits, and more.

Once we've identified apprentices, we're working with their local colleges in conjunction with input and review from SSAB maintenance employees. SSAB apprentices are working hands-on in the mill alongside SSAB maintenance employees to complete 40-hour work weeks, and are also taking classes. We're not only paying apprentices for their time working at SSAB, but also for their time in the classroom. It's been an outstanding program for us.

Also, for me, one unanticipated fallout has been the interest created in SSAB employment as a result of our sustainability programs and our decarbonization efforts. These topics are becoming more and more relevant to young professionals, as they want to be employed by

companies focused on these types of values and corporate culture.

We recently launched a project where our recruiting teams are taking virtual reality goggles to high school and college career fairs so potential employees can get an up-close and personal view of our production facilities and learn about working for SSAB.

Other types of more traditional tactics put into practice are college co-op and intern programs, employing current employees' children as summer help, high school mill tours, and bringing SSAB employees to career fairs and speaking with local high school students. This is an ongoing process that requires attention and fresh ideas.

From my perspective, looking back over the last four decades, the future for steel is more exciting than ever, and I'm excited for our future workforce and all they'll accomplish. ♦

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