

# DaimlerChrysler

## ***Gearing up for safety, no one stays in neutral here***

The mission is to ship the right part to the right place at the right time -- more than 40,000 auto parts a month to car dealerships across British Columbia from the DaimlerChrysler Parts Distribution Centre in Richmond.

It's meant to be a seamless system, not only for storage and retrieval of auto parts, but for the blended staff of about two dozen seasoned, full-time employees and nearly the same number of young workers rotating through the Centre over the course of a year.

All the young workers are students attending recognized college and university programs. DaimlerChrysler's intent isn't to recruit regular employees, but to help students pursuing other careers. Some work full-time in summer. The rest of the year, others are regularly scheduled and pick up a shift or two per week when permanent employees book time off.

"We make sure the students are covered by the national corporation's policy of zero tolerance for injuries," explains Alex Eliopoulos, who manages the distribution centre. "There's no reason anyone should be hurt on the job."

The safety work ethic is driven home in a 10-year-old training program developed and delivered jointly by the company and the Canadian Auto Workers.

"Health and safety is a priority with the CAW, particularly for young workers" says Trung Ngo, the union's plant chair and president of Local 432. "We make sure they're trained properly so they avoid injury. All employees focus on maintaining a safe environment."

He and a DaimlerChrysler health and safety representative present the program — three days of instruction covering safety and emergency procedures, the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, the Centre's equipment and machinery and more.

From the classroom, the student workers move to the plant floor for supervised, hands-on exposure to the tools of the trade — mechanical order pickers, motorized pallet jacks, stretch-wrap machines, tilt tables, cardboard compactors. Always out of bounds is driving stand-up forklifts because the young workers generally don't have enough time to develop the skills necessary for safe operation.

Their first days of instruction are followed by pairing all young workers with regular, full-time Centre employees. The drill is one-on-one mentoring until each student worker does the job efficiently and safely. This final leg of the orientation generally lasts “until we're confident they can function on their own,” according to Eliopoulos: “Some young workers pick it up quickly, others need more time.”

Student workers are allowed to function independently when the mentor and supervisor feel they're ready, but Ngo points out that everyone attends weekly safety talks to refresh and update safety skills.

“Building on the safety aspect for the students is critical,” agrees Eliopoulos. Many have never worked before; they're not here full time, and their minds aren't always on safety. Encouraging young workers to ask questions means less unnecessary work, and it goes a long way to keeping them in one piece.

“A big part is making health safety a value, talking about it and being proactive...not reactive.”

“We really strive for this with the CAW, taking time to talk with the students about safety and their rights and responsibilities.”