

SUCCESS STORIES

## Learn to listen to yourself “There has to be more to life than construction while investing”

Sirkku ja Mika operate two robot milking barns in Finland. When they started on the farm in 1997, they had 20 cows, currently there are 150 cows on the farm. They have made continuous investments. The latest expansion was started in 2020 and the barn with two robots is now operational. We often hear about the end result. Sirkku ja Mika talked about their journey. Everyday was filled with work, construction, and childcare and home care. Along the way, the workload started to become too much and Sirkku became depressed. Sirkku and Mika want to remind us that there is more to life than just construction and work, also during the investment periods.



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Name of the interviewed	Sirkku and Mika Nieminen
Type of farming activity	Barn for two robots. 150 cows and a field of 120 ha with a rental reputation
Mental health issue and affecting factors	The size of the farm has been increased a lot over the years. A large amount of work and family life at the same time, 4 children.

### What is your story?

Sirkku and Mika took over as the successors of Mika's parents in 1997. At first they built the house where they currently live.. The barn built by Mika's father had room for 20 dairy cows. The old barn was initially expanded so that there was a maximum of 25 cows. The youngest of the couple's children was born in 2006. In 2007, the construction of a new barn commenced on a different plot of land. In 2008, the new barn was ready, with a milking station and 80 cows. When moving to a new barn in 2008, the amount of work did not decrease rather it increased. A few years later, covered slab silos were built. There is a lot of work involved in increasing production and it takes quite a long time. Sirkku says that at that time she was working all her waking hours. During the barn-working time, the grandparents were taking care of the children. After coming back from farm work, Sirkku continued with childcare and home care. She lost all other contacts and only had enough time for errands. Mika was responsible for field work and construction work, which has been going on continuously on the farm. In 2011, Sirkku fell ill with depression and was on sick leave. At the beginning, a substitute was hired to help in the barn, so that Sirkku's workload could be reduced. Before Sirkku got sick, they had no paid labor on the farm; the grandparents were somewhat helpful.

In the years before Sirkku's illness, a lot of investments had been made on the farm, which is why the economical burden from the loan was also high. When thinking about hiring an employee, there was the pressure that they have to manage by themselves. The investments had been made in a financially sustainable way, because a lot of personal work input was used in the construction. On the other hand, the large share of personal work burden caused its own pressure. In the end, it went well in terms of getting an employee. A person from the village came to ask for a job when his previous job duties with another employer were about to end. Now he has been working on the farm for 12 years.

Over the years, the children also grew up and participated in the farm work. In 2020, the barn was expanded and there are currently two milking robots. Sirkku and Mika have their own areas of responsibility. Sirkku has planned the functional design of the barn - how to make the old barn and the extension part into a functional unit. Sirkku is primarily responsible for animal fertility, breeding and maintaining records, Mika is responsible for the economic aspects, machines and field duties. The children contribute a lot in the field work. Breeding was done using their own animals rather than buying animals. Increasing production has thus been slower, but the animal lineage is in better control. A cottage in the nearby area offers Mika and Sirkku a place for relaxation.

### Handling the situation

Sirkku received therapy for depression. The decrease in the workload also had a large impact in the recovery. At first, a substitute worker was used for the farm work. The therapist understood the situation and indicated that the recovery will take time. The understanding encounter gave Sirkku permission to be sick and she immediately received a longer sick leave and a return to work was not attempted too hastily. When an employee was hired to replace her, it was a relief. Having an employee provided hope that it's not necessary to return to the same high workload. Mika's support and understanding was important in the recovery.

Mika was taking part in various non-profit organizations and he did not give them up during the construction years either. Seeing life outside of work was important. Mika feels that in the early stages of Sirkku's illness, it was difficult for him to understand the issue. It was hard to understand how and why the other person experiences things so differently.

A common goal is important. When something comes up, they are discussed and agreed upon. Work is done towards common goals usually successfully, but sometimes there are failures. You have to learn from failures, improve something or create something else.

Recovery from depression takes time. Sirkku feels that tolerance for stress is currently at a lower level than before the depression, but nowadays the ability to read oneself is better. When the stress level starts to rise, you have to pay attention to it and defuse the situation. There should be nice and pleasant things in everyday life.

### Conclusion and tips

Mika describes that he thinks about issues quite differently. Much broader than before the investments. When you see life and the world, you begin to understand that we are quite small here. Understanding how much you have to learn, study and listen all the time. Everything is done for ourselves and for the next generation. At the same time, you can be yourself. You don't have to be different because of others.

### Tips to other farmers

*“When starting investments, you have to have enough enthusiasm with you. There has to be more to life than construction while investing.” Mika*

The amount of work during construction projects is large, because during construction you also have to take care of other work on the farm and the production must remain at a good level. You have to give enough time to plan the investment and also visit different farms. Finding the right construction partners also takes time. It is important that when investing you keep in mind what you are aiming for and what you hope for. Do your own thing. One should be careful and precise with the content of the agreements and contracts. Contracts are a big entity and come with their own difficulties.

Mika says that they were instructed during the investment planning that the dimensioning of the workforce should be set to the level of future production at the very beginning. However, when planning an investment, consideration for the human resources is easily overlooked and even with proper planning unfortunate surprises can happen.

Resourcing employees is demanding. It does not make sense to keep additional employees due to cost reasons. The calculation must take into account the resources needed to start and maintain production, also in terms of working time. Another thing that is easily overlooked in resourcing are the resources needed for completing the construction projects. All the little things that remain to be done at the same time when production is already being started in the new building.

When more animals are purchased for the farm, the risks must be known. Even if the cows are really good, it is not a guarantee that, for example, the udder structure of the animals is robot-operable. In the costs related to the purchase of animals, it is good to note that there is a risk that the animal will not adapt. However, once the investment is completed, production must be started as soon as possible.

Competence is highlighted during changes. Entrepreneurs need to train and study more. Both Sirkku and Mika have updated their skills over the years. Even in a large farm, each animal needs its own special care. Investing in animal health is important. Sirkku and Mika have noticed that prediction and prevention are a great “investment”, both in terms of entrepreneur and animal health.

Often, when planning investments, the economic aspects and production are taken into account. Human resources are brought up in the discussion, but it is difficult to estimate how much work there is during construction projects and to manage both the construction and the existing production. Acquire the necessary amount of employees for the increase in production after the investment is completed.

Since it is not always easy to find an employee, only a minimal effort is made to acquire an employee. You have to focus properly in recruiting and in finding an employee; the effort is a long term investment and adds significant value. If you are investing in the production, I hope that when making the calculations related to the investment, you realistically consider the amount of work and

the need for employees. An entrepreneur must have time to sleep. Sirkku's and Mika's tip, that there is more to life than just work and construction during investment periods, is a valuable one.

If you feel that you're working all of your waking hours or you don't have time to recover from work, stop! Asking for help is brave. It takes courage to go to the doctor and discuss your own coping skills. It is courage to notice that there is too much work. It is courage to hire an employee. If your financial situation is such that hiring an employee does not seem possible, ask for help planning your finances. The time to ask for help is always good and right.

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