

The Skills Shift:

From Curriculum to Competence Vitae

An Illustrated Science Short Novel
About Rethinking Careers, Competences,
and the Future of Work



Stefan T. Siegel, Marco Strate & Bernadette Dilger

With illustrations by Pia Valär

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Authors: Dr. Stefan T. Siegel, Dr. Marco Strate, and Prof. Dr. Bernadette Dilger

Illustrations: © Pia Valär | illu@piavalaer.ch | www.piavalaer.ch

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Dedication

To all those who dare to rethink their careers, who see beyond titles and degrees, and who believe that true competence is not just where you've been, but what you know, what you can do, and what you value.

“Not all those who wander are lost”
(The Riddle of Strider in The Fellowship
of the Ring, J.R.R. Tolkien)

Contents

The characters in this science short novel	5
Chapter 1: Looking, but not finding	6
Chapter 2: Disillusioned	16
Chapter 3: New perspectives	31
Key insights: From Curriculum Vitae to Competence Vitae	57
Acknowledgements	69
About the authors & illustrator	70

The characters in this science short novel



Nour El-Hassan
(Main Character) Fifteen years as a Corporate Event Manager, a solid career built step by step – and now ready for something new. The problem is not her capability.



Prof. Dr. Bernadette Dilger
(Professor, University of St.Gallen) Bernadette studies how competences are structured, documented, and made visible. In this story, she does not lecture – she asks the questions that make familiar assumptions feel suddenly fragile.



Dr. Marco Strate
(Research Associate, University of St.Gallen) Marco is Bernadette's reliable research associate and an old acquaintance of Nour. Over coffee, he listens to her story of a near-failed event and sketches a first draft of her Competence Vitae on a paper napkin.



Dr. Stefan T. Siegel
(Continuing Education Provider) Stefan has spent years pushing vocational education towards competence orientation – away from credentials as endpoints, towards learning that prepares people for real work.



Tanja Moser
(Recruiter at a Swiss ICT SME) Tanja fills roles under pressure, using instruments she knows are imperfect. She screens for what is easy to measure – and quietly wonders what she keeps missing.

Chapter 1: Looking, but not finding

Nour

Switzerland in April looks exactly as it should. Trains run on time. The lake catches the light. The mountains stay where they are put.

On her last day, colleagues filled the meeting room with flowers. There were speeches, laughter, the particular warmth people extend to someone who has genuinely delivered. Her manager raised a glass: “Fifteen years, Nour. You built something here.”

She smiled. Meant it. On the train home, flowers balanced across her knees, the lake sliding past the window, something arrived alongside the pride. Not regret. Not yet. More like the sensation of stepping off a moving surface and finding the ground unexpectedly still.

What comes next? And then, before she could stop it: *Does it have to look like what came before?*

She had felt the field’s limits for a while without naming them directly. Tightening budgets. Less room for the kind of work she found engaging. Fewer places to go that were not simply more of the same, at larger scale. She was not looking for a promotion. She wanted something different – which meant, for the first time, questioning the path itself rather than the next step along it.

That thought unsettled her more than she expected. *Is it too late to change course?* she wrote in her notebook one evening. Beneath it, without quite meaning to: *How far can someone move beyond who they have already become?*

She gave herself time. A holiday, then a longer pause. It was the first real interruption in years of deadlines and delivery. No events to manage. No timelines to hold. No next task waiting at the edge of every evening. She woke later than she had in years. Cooked meals that took more than twenty minutes. Noticed that the jasmine outside her kitchen window had been in bloom for weeks without her registering it.

She began asking different questions. Not *what job should I apply for?* but *what do I actually know? What do I do well – and what do I want to stop doing entirely?* She remembered a model from her studies: *ikigai*, a Japanese word for what makes life worth living, popularised in the West as the intersection of what you are good at, what you enjoy, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for. She had encountered it once in a seminar, nodded, and moved on. Now she drew it in her notebook, by hand. Four overlapping circles. Her own labels – *complex logistics, working with people, building experiences and relationships that last, being paid reliably* – inked into the outer segments. The centre, where the answer was supposed to converge, stayed blank. She stared at it for a while. Then made coffee.

After a few weeks, she started searching. Job portal after job portal. The labour market looked orderly from the outside. Up close, it fragmented fast: overlapping roles, contradictory requirements, skills that meant something different in every company that used them.

She changed approach. Instead of filtering by title, she read the task descriptions buried inside the adverts. And found something that stopped her mid-scroll.

Designing customer experiences. Coordinating stakeholders across competing interests. Bringing complex, moving parts to a coherent result.

“That’s what I did,” she said aloud to no one. “That’s exactly what I did in my last job.”

The titles were different. The underlying work did not seem so different. She prepared her documents carefully – cover letter, CV, references – and applied for several roles that seemed, based on the actual tasks described, like a close match. For the first time in weeks, she felt something close to momentum.

The responses that arrived carried variations of the same sentence: *your profile is interesting, but we have found candidates who better fit our requirements and have direct working experience in this field.* Fifteen years of work, acknowledged and set aside in the same breath.

“Direct experience,” she said, reading another one. “What do they think I’ve been doing?”

But the frustration had nowhere to go. The process was polite and closed. She rewrote her cover letter. Applied again, more broadly. Waited.

The search ground on. Some days she felt close. Most days she felt strangely absent from her own applications – as if the documents she was sending represented someone she recognised but could no longer quite locate. A friend asked, over dinner, how the search was going. “Slowly,” Nour said. Her friend nodded in the way people do when they want to ask more and decide not to. The conversation moved on. She was relieved and, immediately afterwards, lonelier for it.

Each rejection, however courteous, said the same thing in careful language: *not quite right*. She began to doubt the decision to leave. The old role had been structured, familiar, legible. She had known exactly who she was and what she was doing. That certainty, which she had taken for granted for fifteen years, was proving surprisingly hard to replace.

Late one evening, she sat at her desk with her CV open on the screen. She read it slowly, the way you read something written by someone you no longer quite recognise. Job titles. Dates. Sectors. Qualifications listed in reverse chronological order. Every entry correct. The whole document somehow insufficient, like a photograph of a room that gives no sense of the person who lived in it.

She scrolled to the top. Read it again. *Is this really all I am?* Her finger hovered over the trackpad. Then she closed the laptop – not because she had found an answer, but because she could not look at it any longer.

I'm looking, she thought. *But I'm not finding.*

Tanja

Elsewhere in Switzerland, in a recruiter's office, Tanja Moser was working through another stack of applications.

She was good at this. Efficient, thorough, experienced enough to read a CV quickly and assemble a first impression before the coffee went cold. Job titles, years in role, qualifications, sector background – the usual signals, scanned and sorted fast enough to keep pace with the volume. Sixty applications for a role in client and partner management that needed to be filled within the month.

One application sat in the pile. A woman in her early fifties, fifteen years at a single company, a background in corporate event management, a CAS to her name. The documents were well-prepared: clear, thoughtful, better written than most. Tanja read it twice, which she almost never did.

The problem arrived anyway. Formal markers were stronger elsewhere. More direct sector experience. A more familiar career path. A title that matched the role description without requiring translation. She set the application aside.

It stayed with her.

What stayed was less the application itself than the moment of setting it down – the small, practised efficiency of it, a decision made and filed before the discomfort had fully formed. *She may well be a strong candidate*, Tanja thought, going back to it. *But I cannot prove it from the CV. And I need to be able to justify my decisions to my team lead. And she is already over fifty.*

She moved on. The pile had fifty-nine other applications in it.

Over coffee that afternoon, she said something to a colleague, not a complaint exactly, more like thinking aloud. “I keep feeling that strong candidates are slipping through. We talk about a skills shortage. And then I wonder if we’d even recognise the skills if they showed up without the expected packaging.”

Her colleague nodded. The more they talked, the worse it got. Positions open for months. Poor hires generating costs no one had budgeted for. Applicants who looked perfect on paper and struggled in practice. Applicants who looked wrong on paper and might not have struggled at all – but they’d never know.

“It feels like employers and candidates keep missing each other,” Tanja said. “And I’m not sure the problem is the candidates.”

She didn’t finish the thought out loud. But it sat there between them, obvious enough: *if the problem isn’t the candidates, then the problem might be the instrument we’re using to find them.*

And she was the one using it.

What the CV had told her was where this woman had been. What it hadn’t told her, what it seemed structurally unable to tell her, was what she was actually capable of. The two were not the same thing. Tanja had always known this, in the vague way you know something you’ve never had reason to examine. Now, staring at a role that had been vacant for six weeks and was quietly becoming a problem, it felt less vague.

She pulled the application back out. Read it a third time. The task descriptions in the woman's references pointed towards something – coordination across competing interests, delivery under pressure, clients kept calm through situations they hadn't known were close to failing. None of it was in the expected sector. All of it was real. The CV was not lying. It simply had no mechanism for making the connection visible, and the process had no time to build one from scratch.

She filed it. The role needed to be filled. The process would run as designed.

But the question didn't file with it.

Stefan

In another part of Switzerland, Stefan was asking related questions at scale.

His institution, a continuing education provider with a broad portfolio of courses, certificates, and postgraduate programmes, had been running guidance sessions for years. Career changers, people returning to the workforce after a break, mid-career professionals looking for a next step they could not quite identify. They arrived with the same handful of questions. *Which course is right for me? Do these qualifications actually help, or do they just look better on paper? What will employers want in five years?*

Stefan had learned to answer carefully. No provider could make the decision for someone else. The right next step depended on what a person wanted to do, what they already knew, and what they still needed to learn. Good guidance helped structure the choice. It did not remove the uncertainty.

But the questions were changing. More people arrived not with a specific course in mind but with something harder to address: not *which programme?* but *what kind of learning really moves someone forward?* The offer had expanded – short courses, online modules, micro-credentials stacked alongside longer programmes – but expansion had not produced clarity. If anything, the opposite.

He had started to see the shape of the problem more clearly. The individual modules did not connect. Learners moved through one course, then another, collecting credentials that sat beside each other without adding up to anything coherent. The institution offered pathways in name but not in practice. And

the offerings themselves were built on instinct and tradition more than on evidence – on what the institution had always done, rather than on what the labour market demanded. Without data on which competences employers needed, programme development was, at best, educated guesswork. Stefan had been in enough curriculum meetings to know that nobody said this out loud.

He had been talking about it with Prof. Dr. Bernadette Dilger and Marco Strate at the University of St.Gallen, who were working on these questions as part of a larger research initiative: mapping individual competences, connecting them to what employers were looking for and to what vocational and continuing education institutions offered, and building the kind of evidence base that continuing education providers almost entirely lacked. The conversations had sharpened his thinking. What was missing was not effort. It was architecture.

Then came the guidance session that stayed with him.

A woman in her early fifties. Clearly capable – he had enough experience to read that quickly. Clearly stuck. She had spent fifteen years building real expertise, could describe her work with precision and without self-promotion, and had arrived with the reasonable expectation that someone in his position could help her see where it might lead next. He had asked the right questions. Listened carefully. Pulled out the brochures, walked her through the current offer, suggested three or four options that seemed, given what she'd described, like plausible starting points.

She had left with the brochures. He was fairly sure she had put them in her bag out of politeness.

The session had run correctly – good practice, attentive guidance, appropriate next steps offered. She had not needed any of that. She had needed someone to help her see that what she had already built was worth documenting and presenting differently. That the competence was there. That the question was not *what course should I take next* but *how do I make visible what I already know?* His institution had no instrument for that conversation. So he had given her brochures.

He raised it with his team the following week, not the specific session, but the pattern it had sharpened.

“If people keep arriving with the same question,” he said, “it is not an individual problem. It may be a structural one. We are adding modules, but we are not building pathways. We are following tradition, but we are not following evidence. And if we cannot answer these questions, we have a problem.”

The room was quiet for a moment.

Then someone said: “So what do we do differently?”

Stefan did not have a complete answer. But he had somewhere to look – and people to look with. The question was now in the room. He intended to keep it there.

Chapter 2: Disillusioned

Nour

The letter arrived on a Tuesday. Polite, as they all were. *Your profile is interesting, but we are looking for candidates with direct experience in this context.* She had stopped reading them carefully weeks ago. The language was always the same: somewhat generic, short, final.

She sat with it for a moment, then closed the email.

The first thing she did was rewrite her cover letter. The second was sign up for an online course.

Neither felt entirely rational. The cover letter was already good. The course – a certificate in project management methodology, twelve modules, self-paced – was not something she particularly wanted. But it was something to do. A gap she had identified or thought she had. Something that might explain why the applications were not working, if only she could name the problem precisely enough to fix it.

She could not. That was the difficulty.

What followed had the texture of productive work without the substance of it. She applied more broadly, rewrote the letter again, adjusted the emphasis, stayed up past midnight crafting versions tailored to specific adverts. A digital badge arrived for the project management course – a small graphic, a congratulatory email she closed without reading. She started a stakeholder communication workshop. Enrolled in a webinar series and watched three sessions over lunch before the fourth sat unwatched in her browser for two weeks and she quietly

stopped. She added the certificates to her CV in a section she called *Continuing Professional Development*, which looked purposeful from a distance and felt, up close, like rearranging furniture.

It was not working.

She knew this. What she did not know was what else to do. If the gap was invisible, filling it with credentials was the only strategy available. And so, she kept filling it, with the grimness of someone who has identified the wrong solution and cannot yet see the right one.

Something darker had started to settle in the quieter moments. Not frustration – something closer to embarrassment. She had left a good position, a stable career, a clear identity. Months of rejection letters and half-finished online courses was not what she had imagined when she had sat on the train with flowers across her knees wondering what came next. People around her had not said it directly, but she could feel the unspoken version of the question: *why didn't she just stay? Or at least move up – a bigger company, a senior title, a logical next step?*

The easier path was still visible. Event management, more senior. She had the experience. She would almost certainly get it if she applied. But she did not want it. And increasingly she could not tell whether that made her principled or simply naïve – whether she was someone with the resolve to want something different, or someone failing at the basic task of making sensible decisions. She turned the question over most evenings and arrived each time at the same inconclusive place.

What if the problem isn't the CV? she wrote one evening. *What if the problem is me?*

She did not answer it. But she did not cross it out either.

A few days later, she met Marco for coffee – an old acquaintance, someone she had known loosely for years through a shared contact. She had brought the job advert and her CV without quite planning to, folded into her bag alongside her keys. She took them out and put them on the table between the cups.

“I keep recognising myself in these roles,” she said. “The tasks, the responsibilities, I’ve done all of it. And yet I still don’t seem to count as a match. I don’t know what’s missing. So, I keep adding certificates. And I’m starting to wonder whether I should just stop and move up the ladder instead. At least I’d know what I was doing.”

Marco picked up the advert, read it, set it down. Then he picked up her CV and read that too, more slowly. She watched him read it the way she had been reading rejections – scanning for the thing that wasn’t there.

“Tell me about a difficult event,” he said. “Something that went wrong or nearly did. Something where you had to hold everything together.”

She hesitated. It was an odd question. Not *what are your key strengths* or *which roles are you targeting* – the questions guidance sessions had trained her to answer. She wasn’t sure what he was looking for, or whether what she had to say would be what he needed. But he waited, and eventually she started talking.

She described an international client conference. Three hundred delegates, six sponsors with conflicting priorities, a keynote

speaker who cancelled four days before. She had restructured the timeline overnight, realigned the team, renegotiated with two vendors simultaneously, kept the client calm through a situation they hadn't known was close to failing. The event ran without visible disruption.

As she talked, she heard herself describing things she had never named directly. How she had read the room when the client's expectations shifted mid-briefing – not a skill she had listed anywhere, just something she did. How she had sequenced tasks to protect the critical path when two workstreams collided. How she had held the space between a sponsor's communications team and her own vendor, two groups who wanted incompatible things, without letting either feel managed.

Marco had picked up a pen. He was writing on a napkin.

She kept talking. He kept writing.

When she finished, he turned the napkin around.

Not job titles. Not employment history. *Customer experience design. Stakeholder alignment. Planning under pressure. Translating competing needs. Quality under constraint. Bringing people to a shared result.*

"This," he said, tapping the napkin, "is what you can do."

Then he tapped her CV.

"This mostly tells me where you have been."

He leaned back. "A CV communicates positions: titles, dates, sectors, trajectory. It says almost nothing about what you actually built. It doesn't show your judgement, your methods,

how you think under pressure. And it offers no proof. Employers are left to infer competence from proximity: if you worked in the right sector long enough, they assume the right skills. But you haven't been in their sector. So, the inference doesn't fire. The competence is there, you just showed me, but the CV has no mechanism for making it visible."

He looked at the napkin. "What could help you gain more clarity about what you know, can do, and value is the idea of a Competence Vitae."

Nour looked at the two things on the table. The document she had spent months adjusting, and a paper napkin covered in biro. She thought about the cover letters rewritten past midnight, the digital badges, the webinar series she had abandoned. An attempt to solve, through accumulation, a problem that was structural. She had been adding to a document that could not carry what she was adding.

She mentioned, almost as an aside, the guidance session she had attended a few weeks earlier. Disappointing, mostly – brochures, uncertainty – but one person there had asked different questions. Had listened in a way that felt genuinely curious rather than efficient.

Marco looked up. She described the institution. He nodded slowly.

"That sounds like Stefan," he said. "He's our practice partner in the Innosuisse project and is trying to rethink and rebuild his institution's programmes on the basis of our findings. The Swiss vocational education world is not large." He paused. "You should meet Bernadette."

She did not ask who Bernadette was. The way he said it made the question unnecessary.

On the walk home, the napkin folded in her bag, something had shifted. Not relief, not yet. But a change in the quality of the uncertainty. It was the same open situation. It felt different to be standing in it.

The easier path was still there. Senior role, familiar sector, predictable progression. She had not ruled it out. But she understood now why she had been resisting it. Moving up the ladder she was already on would answer a different question than the one she was actually asking.

She did not need a better cover letter. She did not need another certificate. What she needed was a different document altogether – one that made visible what the CV had buried: not where she had been, but what she knew, what she could do, what she cared enough to act on under pressure.

She did not know yet what that looked like. But for the first time in months, she knew what the question was. And that, she thought, was somewhere to start.

Tanja

The conversation with her colleague had been a month ago. Tanja was still thinking about it.

They had said nothing revelatory. CV-based screening was not a mistake – it was a system, and a functional one. It handled volume, created consistent decisions, gave hiring managers something defensible when a choice was later questioned. You needed a process that could run reliably at speed. The alternative, reading every application with the attention a single dossier might deserve, was not realistic with sixty applications per cycle, let alone at scale.

That was not what was bothering her.

What was bothering her was the gap between what the process was optimised for and what the company needed. The role had now been vacant for almost three months. Two full rounds of mostly unsuitable applications, screened correctly, largely set aside. The process was doing exactly what it was designed to do. And it was not working.

Her manager's question had become direct: *when does this get resolved?*

She requested thirty minutes with the hiring manager and came with one question: "Not what the advert says. What does this role need?"

The answer was specific. Someone who could bring together conflicting expectations. Coordinate different stakeholders without losing sight of the overall experience. Hold things

together when everything was pulling in different directions. “The sector knowledge, we can teach that. What we can’t teach is the judgement.”

Tanja picked up the published advert and read it back. The gap was immediate. Formal requirements dominated: a specific qualification, years of experience in a comparable role, sector familiarity. The competences the hiring manager had just described – judgement under pressure, the capacity to hold complexity, the disposition to keep the whole picture in view – were barely present. Nobody had been careless; these qualities were simply hard to specify and harder to screen for at volume.

“We’ve been screening for what’s easy to measure,” Tanja said. “Not for what actually matters.”

“Yes. That’s probably right.”

Together, they reduced the role to three questions: *What must this person know? What must they be able to do? What kind of value judgement will the role require?* Rough, provisional, slower to apply. But more honest than the advert.

Back at her desk, Tanja opened the pile and read differently, not for sector fit or title match, but for texture. What had this person done when things went wrong? Where, beneath the job titles, could you see how someone thought?

It was slower. Significantly slower – time the process had never budgeted for. Most of the pile, read this way, remained thin. But details surfaced. A candidate who had managed a cross-functional project through a restructure. Another who had handled a significant client crisis with no senior support.

Someone who had spent three years coordinating complex stakeholder groups in a voluntary capacity – work listed in a footnote, almost apologetically, as if its author was unsure whether it counted.

She paused on that one.

Filtered out in the first pass: not enough formal sector experience, non-standard trajectory, difficult to justify quickly. But read slowly, it pointed towards something the standard profiles did not – capability built outside the expected context, in work the CV format barely had room to acknowledge. The three years of voluntary coordination mapped directly onto what the hiring manager had described. Judgement. Holding competing interests. No formal authority, no budget, genuine disagreement on every side.

It had been set aside in the first round.

She marked it. Marked others. Not shortlisting – something less certain. Candidates whose dossiers raised a question the previous reading had not asked: *what might this person be capable of, given the right context?*

She knew what she was doing was a workaround. Reading CVs more carefully did not change what a CV was built to carry – positions, credentials, sectors. It would always leave out the judgement, the values, the learning that had happened outside formal programmes. Better reading helped at the margins. It did not fix the instrument.

She checked the name on that dossier. It was the application from the first round – the woman in her early fifties, event

management background, fifteen years at a single company. The one she had set aside a month ago with a thought she had then considered and moved past: *she may well be a strong candidate, but I cannot prove it from the CV*. She read it again, slowly, with the three columns in mind. The references described situations – not just endorsements, but specific moments: a supplier crisis managed without escalation, a client retained through a restructure that should have cost the relationship. Competences visible, if you knew to look for them. Invisible if you were screening at pace for sector fit.

The process, run correctly and professionally, had filtered this out. She had filtered it out. Both things were true.

She reached for her phone. Stopped. Put it down. There was a procedure for reopening a round, and it involved a conversation with her manager she was not yet ready to have without a clearer argument. What she had so far was a feeling sharpened by a three-column framework. That counted for something. It was not yet enough.

But the application sat on her desk rather than back in the pile.

She thought about what hiring differently would require – not just reading more carefully but changing the instrument itself. Building processes around demonstrated competence rather than proximate credentials. Longer, more qualitative evaluation. A willingness to engage with non-linear careers and ask what they had built rather than where they had been. Real cost, under real time pressure. She had no illusions about that.

But every poor hire generated costs too. Costs that showed up later – next quarter, not this one – which was precisely why

nobody fixed the upstream problem. The short-term logic was always to screen faster. The long-term cost was to keep hiring badly and calling it efficiency.

“It’s not just a hiring problem,” she had told the hiring manager. “It’s a talent problem. And a training problem.”

What she had not said, because she was still working out whether she believed it fully: *it might also be a document problem*. Not the candidates. Not the process. The instrument at the centre of both.

That, she thought, was worth saying out loud to someone. She just hadn’t found the right conversation yet.

Stefan

The meeting had been scheduled as a routine programme review. It had not stayed that way.

Stefan had come prepared. For months, working alongside Prof. Dr. Bernadette Dilger and Marco Strate at the University of St.Gallen as a practice partner in the Innosuisse project, he had been developing a case: move away from standalone further education courses towards something more purposeful – tailored, goal-oriented development paths built from connected learning elements, anchored to actual competence demands in the labour market. Not a credential for its own sake. A structured route towards something a person could demonstrate, document, and use.

The research collaboration had sharpened his thinking considerably. The project kept surfacing how many people were looking for orientation, suitable courses, and clearly structured learning paths in a changing labour market, and how much of what they had already learned never showed up in a standard credential. The institution, as currently designed, had no language for any of it.

He put the proposal on the table.

The room was not persuaded.

“Employers still ask for the credential,” said a colleague. A reasonable point. Learners asked about it too – often in the first five minutes of a guidance session, before they had described what they wanted to do.

“Employers ask for it,” Stefan said, “because it is the only signal we have given them. If we offer something more precise – a documented competence path, with evidence, tied to what the role requires – the ask changes. We are not trapped by the market. We helped shape it.”

Another colleague pressed further: “But who decides which competences matter? And how do we build paths when every learner’s situation is different?”

That was the harder question, and Stefan did not pretend otherwise. He walked through what the Innosuisse work was beginning to show: that the answer lay in the tasks themselves – the concrete activities appearing in job adverts, in occupational profiles, in what employers described when asked what they needed. Start there. Build upward. Connect learning elements into sequences that moved a person towards a defined capability, not just a certificate. Support participants in capturing what they were developing along the way – making their competences visible, credible, and portable.

A third colleague, who had been quiet until now, leaned forward. “We’ve been doing this for twenty years. Our completion rates are good. Our learner satisfaction is good. Why change a model that works?”

Stefan looked at him. It was the argument he had expected and the one he found most difficult, not because it was wrong about the numbers, but because it was right about the wrong thing. Completion rates measured whether people finished. Satisfaction scores measured whether they felt good about finishing. Neither measured whether what they had learned had moved them forward. The institution had been optimising for

the wrong outcomes for two decades and calling it evidence of success.

He said a version of this. The room did not resolve.

There were real questions he could not yet answer – implementation cost, staff capacity, the real risk of disrupting a model that was, by conventional measures, functioning. Colleagues raising them in good faith. Stefan could work with that. Resistance he could argue with. What he could not work with was the feeling, walking out of the meeting, that the institution's deepest investment was not in its learners but in its own continuity – that the programme existed, in some fundamental sense, for the programme's sake.

He thought again of the guidance session. The woman in her early fifties who had left with brochures she didn't need. He had run that session correctly. He had also failed her, in the specific way that a well-designed instrument fails when it is applied to the wrong problem. The institution had handed him a set of tools calibrated for one question – *which of our programmes suits you?* – and sent him into a conversation that required a different question entirely: *what have you already built, and how do we make it legible?*

He did not have those tools yet. But he knew now, with more precision than before, exactly what was missing. That was something.

What he did not know, walking back to his office, was that the same woman had that afternoon met Marco Strate for coffee. Or that Marco, hearing her describe the guidance session, had immediately said: *that sounds like Stefan*. Or that he had then done

what he always did when someone needed to think differently about competence: suggested she meet Bernadette.

The Swiss vocational education world was small. The same problems kept producing the same conversations. Sometimes, though, the conversations converged in ways that changed something.

Reform in progress. Incomplete. But moving, which was more than he could have said six months ago.

Chapter 3: New perspectives

Nour

The University of St.Gallen sat above the city on a hill, its buildings arranged with the kind of deliberate order that implied things would be thought through carefully here. Nour had walked past it before without going in. She would not have described herself as the kind of person who belonged in a place like this, though she was becoming less certain, lately, of what that phrase even meant.

Marco had texted the building and room number. She found it at the end of a corridor on the third floor: a seminar room with tall windows and a view across the campus. Bernadette and Marco were already mid-conversation when she arrived, papers spread across the table, a half-empty coffee pot between them.

Marco made introductions. Bernadette Dilger – compact, direct, the kind of person whose attention felt complete when it landed on you – looked up from the papers and shook Nour’s hand with the efficiency of someone who did not perform warmth but had the real version. Another cup appeared. Nour sat down.

“Marco told me something about your situation,” Bernadette said. “But I’d rather hear it from you.”

So Nour told it – the search, the rejections, the napkin, the certificates that hadn’t moved anything. She kept it brief; she had told the story enough times to know which parts carried weight. Bernadette listened without taking notes, which Nour found unexpectedly steady. Most people who listened to problems reached for a pen.

When she finished, Bernadette was quiet for a moment. Then: “What do you actually know how to do? Not your job title. Not your employment history. What can you genuinely do, under pressure, that other people find difficult to do?”

Nour started carefully. The conference crisis she had already described to Marco. She added the supplier negotiation from the year before – three competing vendors, a contract clause nobody had flagged until forty-eight hours before sign-off, resolved without the client knowing it had nearly collapsed. She described the internal restructure that had landed on her team mid-project, the way she had rebuilt the stakeholder map from scratch while keeping the timeline intact.

Marco was writing. This time on a proper notepad rather than a napkin, in two columns.

“Stop there,” Bernadette said, not unkindly. She turned to Marco. “What have we got?”

He read back what he had written in the right-hand column. He had recorded the actions inside the events, not the events themselves. *Reconstructing stakeholder relationships under time pressure. Identifying contract risk before escalation. Holding client confidence through managed uncertainty. Rebuilding operational structure mid-delivery.*

Nour listened to her own work described in language she had never used for it. It was a peculiar sensation – recognising something without having named it, the way you might hear a piece of music identified and realise you had been humming it for years.

“That’s four competences,” Bernadette said. “None of them appear on your CV.”

“It’s not only that they don’t appear,” she added, before Nour could respond. “It’s that you may not have fully known you had them. Competences shape what you think and do before you can articulate them. The CV asks you to list. It doesn’t ask you to excavate.”

She stood and wrote three things on the whiteboard: *What you know. What you can do. What you value.*

“The third column,” Bernadette said, tapping *what you value*, “is the one people most often skip. Skills and knowledge are easier to invent. But the disposition – what you care enough to act on under pressure, what you will not compromise even when it would be easier – that is what holds the other two together. Strip it out, and you have a list, not a person.”



Nour looked at the three headings. “How do I fill those in?”

“We ask more questions. You answer them. We see what surfaces.”

What followed was not what Nour had expected.

She had prepared, on the walk up the hill, for something administrative – a structured intake, a framework to slot her experience into. What happened was closer to the thing Bernadette had called excavation: questions she had not been asked before, answers that kept pulling up material she had not thought to bring.

The process she had built from scratch for multi-supplier coordination – she had mentioned it once, briefly, as context for a different story. Bernadette stopped her. “Walk me through that. How did you design it? What were you solving for?”

It had taken three weeks, two failed iterations, and one vendor relationship she had nearly lost before she found the structure that worked. She had never documented it. When she left the company, it ran without her name on it. She had not, until this moment, thought of it as something she had built.

“Why did you not include that?” Marco asked, looking at the notepad.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It felt like part of the job.”

“Most of what people know feels like part of the job,” Bernadette said. “That is precisely why it doesn’t appear on CVs.”

Later, when she had lost track of time and the coffee had gone cold, Bernadette asked about development. People she had brought on. Relationships she had sustained deliberately rather than incidentally.

Nour described a colleague, a project coordinator in her first difficult year, two years before the company restructuring, someone who had nearly left the field entirely. Nour had met her for coffee once a month for eight months. Nothing formal. Just coffee, and the particular quality of attention she had learned to offer, not reassurance, which was easy and useless, but the kind of honest conversation that helped someone locate their own thinking. The coordinator was still in the industry.

She had sent Nour a message when Nour left the company, three lines, that Nour had kept.

“That’s mentoring,” Marco said.

“I know,” Nour said. “I just never thought it was –” She stopped.

“Worth including?” Bernadette said.

“Worth claiming.”

Bernadette wrote something on the notepad. Nour didn’t see what.

Then, almost as an afterthought – she was reaching for her bag, thinking they were nearly done – Nour mentioned the volunteer committee. Three years. A neighbourhood mediation board, two community groups with almost nothing in common except a shared grievance, weekly meetings that had occasionally required her to sit in a room where two people were not speaking to each other and find a way to keep the conversation moving anyway.

She hesitated even as she said it.

“It wasn’t paid,” she said. “I wasn’t sure it counted.”

Bernadette looked at her steadily. “You coordinated complex stakeholder groups with no formal authority, no budget, and genuine disagreement on every side. That is harder than most of what appears on your CV.” A pause – not rhetorical, considered. “I’ve worked with senior managers who couldn’t do what you’re describing. The difficulty is not the skill. The

difficulty is that we've built systems that only recognise certain contexts as legitimate. Within the CV everything else disappears."



In the afternoon, Marco opened the platform he and Bernadette used for what they called the Competence Vitae.

A digital environment built on a different architecture – not a form to fill but a space for capturing competences as they emerged, connecting them to each other and to evidence, and presenting them in forms that could be adapted to different contexts. He walked her through the structure briefly, then stepped back. "Try it," he said. "I'll answer questions when they come up."

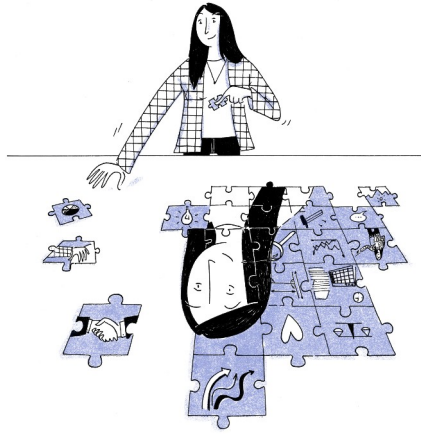
She started with the supplier coordination process – the competence that had surprised her most that morning, the one she had spent three weeks building and then left unnamed for years. She described it in two sentences. The platform prompted her: *Can you evidence this? What would a reader need to see to believe it?*

She thought about it. There was a project reference that touched on it, obliquely. There was a vendor email she might still have, from the second failed iteration, that showed the problem she had been solving. There were two colleagues who had worked inside the structure and could speak to what it had required.

She started a list. The list branched. Forty minutes later she had a skeleton of evidence she had not known she possessed, mapped against a competence she had not known she could name.

It was not the efficient satisfaction of completing a form. It was something stranger – the feeling of watching a picture assemble itself from pieces that had always been there, lying in separate rooms.

“Think of it as puzzle pieces,” Marco said, coming to look over her shoulder. “A work reference describing a specific situation. A certificate. A self-assessed example with context and outcome. A peer who can speak to what they observed. None complete on its own. Together, they start to show something real.”



She worked through two more competences before the light began to shift outside the windows. Both times the evidence branched in directions she hadn't anticipated. The mentoring relationship – she had three emails from the coordinator, none of which she had thought of as documentation, all of which were. The volunteer mediation work – a letter from the board chair she had received on her last day and filed without reading carefully. She pulled it up on her phone. It described, in three specific paragraphs, exactly the capability Bernadette had named.

“I nearly didn’t mention the committee,” she said.

“Most people don’t mention the things that turn out to matter most,” Marco said. He said it without emphasis, as a fact rather than a consolation.

She came to a competence she could name but not yet evidence – stakeholder trust-building, the sustained, low-visibility work of keeping relationships functional through situations that created pressure to let them deteriorate. She hesitated, then marked it honestly: *named, evidence pending*. The platform offered a prompt: *What would evidence of this look like? Who might speak to it?*

She started a note. Didn’t finish it. Left it open.

Bernadette, watching from across the table, said: “Don’t fill that in today.”

Nour looked up.

“The honest gap is more valuable than a claim you can’t sustain. Come back to it when you have something real to put there.”

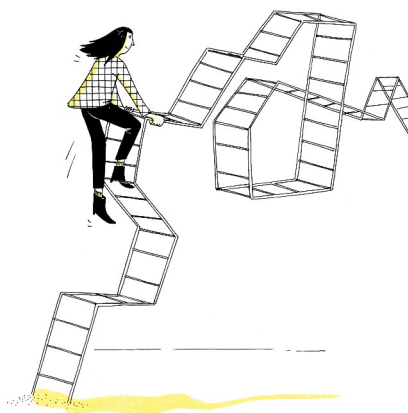
Toward the end of the session, as Nour was reviewing what she had assembled, Bernadette said something that arrived quietly.

“The career ladder has a clear logic: upward, more responsibility, more status. Nothing wrong with it as one option. But it is not the only shape. Some of the most capable people I’ve worked with moved laterally, into adjacent fields – not because they failed at the ladder, but because a career grid, which allows movement in any direction, offered something the ladder couldn’t: range. And range, in a labour market that keeps changing, is often exactly what is needed.”

She said it without looking up from the papers she was sorting – offhand, almost, the way you say something you have thought through thoroughly enough that it no longer requires performance.

“I’ve spent months feeling like I was failing at something straightforward,” Nour said.

Bernadette looked up then. “You were attempting something genuinely difficult with the wrong tools. That is a different problem entirely.”



She left as the light was going off the lake. In her bag: the login for the platform, a list of evidence to locate, references to track

down, two gaps marked honestly open. The Competence Vitae was not finished. It had started.

That was different from where she had been that morning.

Stefan

The pilot had been approved – not enthusiastically. The word *approved* covered a range of institutional temperaments, and this one sat closer to *tolerated*, but it was enough to begin.

Stefan had learned, over the course of the past year, that this was often how change entered institutions: not through conviction but through exhaustion. The objections had not been resolved. They had simply been raised enough times that the people raising them had grown tired of the argument without quite conceding it. He was not going to examine that too closely. He had a pilot. He intended to make it count.

What he was proposing was, in practice, a different way of thinking about what a further education programme was for. Instead of a single certificate course, fixed content, fixed sequence, same for everyone, learners would move through a series of smaller, connected learning units, chosen according to what they needed. The destination was the capability, not the credential. *What can this person do when they leave that they could not do when they arrived? How can they show it, with evidence, in a way that means something to an employer?*

The institution had never quite asked it that way before. He had put the question in writing, in the pilot proposal, and had been mildly surprised when nobody struck it out.

The framework came from the work he had been doing alongside the IWP, and it built on labour market and education market data. Identify the competences the labour market demands. Build learning pathways that lead towards those demands. Support learners in documenting what they are

building along the way – not as an afterthought, not as a box to tick at the end, but as part of the learning itself. Making competences visible was not a separate activity. It was half the work.

That last part had taken him time to understand fully. He had come into the Innosuisse collaboration assuming the core problem was programme architecture – sequencing, connection, evidence-based curriculum design. All of that was real and necessary. But what Bernadette and Marco kept returning to was the documentation layer of the Competence Vitae: the supportive elements that helped individuals capture what they had built, name it precisely enough to be credible, and connect it to what the labour market was asking for. Without that, even a well-designed pathway left learners with a new credential and the same old problem. They had completed something. They still could not show what they knew.

He thought about this at the first pilot session, watching twelve learners move through the initial competence mapping exercise. Most of them arrived with the same instinct Nour had arrived with in the guidance session – the assumption that what mattered was what they had done, described in the language of job titles and organisations. The exercise asked something different. *Not where. What. Not which company. Which capability, developed how, evidenced by what.*

It took most of them thirty minutes to shift registers. A few never quite did, not that day. One woman – mid-career, lateral move from a sector she had left three years ago – spent twenty minutes insisting that her work in an industry Stefan had never heard of was too specific to be relevant anywhere else. He sat with her for a while, asking the kind of questions Marco had

taught him to ask: what had she done when things went wrong? What had she built that outlasted her? She described, eventually, a supplier management system she had designed under significant time pressure and handed to a team that was still running it. She had not thought to mention it at the start. She had not thought it counted.

He recognised the pattern. He had seen it in the guidance session. He had seen it in a dozen conversations since.

The pilot ran for six weeks. Not all of it went well. Two of the learning units needed restructuring – the sequencing had assumed a baseline that several participants did not share, and he had missed it in the design. One session ran over by forty minutes and achieved approximately nothing. A learner dropped out in week three, citing time pressure, and Stefan spent longer than he should have wondering whether the design had failed her or the circumstances had simply been impossible. He did not know. He noted it.

What worked was harder to summarise and more important. Learners who had arrived describing themselves in terms of their most recent job title were, by week five, using different language – not the language of the framework, which was useful but not theirs, but something they had arrived at themselves. A man who had introduced himself in week one as “a logistics coordinator, mainly automotive” described himself in week five as someone who built operational systems in complex, high-turnover environments, with evidence for three of the words in that sentence. The shift was not cosmetic. He was using language he could defend.

Stefan wrote this down in his pilot notes. He wrote down a lot that he did not expect to write down. The failures were instructive. The partial successes were interesting in different ways. He had spent years arguing for a different model; the pilot was showing him, in granular detail, where his argument had been right, where it had been vague, and where it had been quietly wrong in ways he had not anticipated.

That, he thought, was what a pilot was supposed to do. He had hoped for more confirmation and was getting more information.

Before the final session, a learner – the woman who had spent the first day insisting her experience was too sector-specific to transfer – submitted her completed Competence Vitae draft for peer review. Stefan read it before the session began. It was twelve pages, carefully structured, the gaps marked honestly and the evidence specific enough to be useful. The supplier management system was in it, two pages in, with a reference and a self-assessment and a note about what she was still developing. It was not a perfect document. It was a true one.

He put it down on the table and looked out of the window for a moment.

He had been in this field long enough to know that a single pilot, however well it went, changed nothing structurally. The institution would evaluate the results, note the complications, and weigh them against the cost of scaling. Some colleagues would remain unconvinced. The credential would not disappear from the offer any time soon – the market still asked for it, and the market was not wrong to, not entirely. The change would be slow and incremental and would require being made again in

every conversation, every proposal, every round of programme review. He had known this going in. He had not found a way to make it feel less slow.

But there was a Competence Vitae draft on the table that had not existed six weeks ago. There was a learner who had arrived describing herself in the narrowest possible terms and was leaving with language for something real. There were ten others like her.

In his experience, that was usually how things started.

Nour

Three weeks after the day at the University of St.Gallen, she was running her usual search when she saw it.

The same company. A role in client and partner management – the one she had applied for months ago and been declined, politely, in the usual language.

She would have scrolled past it except that the description had changed. The formal requirements were still present, but they sat differently on the page. What the role needed moved closer to the surface: coordinating stakeholders with competing expectations, managing complexity without losing sight of the overall objective, bringing people to a shared result under pressure. Someone had rewritten the advert with more honesty, or more precision, or both.

She read it twice. Alongside the CV the form required, she added the link. Her Competence Vitae: structured by capability rather than chronology, evidenced across formal and informal contexts, specific about what she could demonstrate and honest about what she was still developing. For the first time in this search, she felt that what she was sending represented her, not where she had been, but what she had built.

She submitted it. Closed the laptop. Left the screen dark and went to do something else.

Tanja

The application arrived on a Thursday afternoon, flagged in her inbox with a note from the system: *resubmission, previously reviewed*. Tanja almost moved past it. Resubmissions were rarely worth the time – a tweaked cover letter, a reordered skills section, the same profile dressed in slightly different language. She opened it anyway, because the name was familiar, and she had not forgotten the application she had marked and left on her desk two months ago.

It was not a tweaked cover letter.

The cover letter was two paragraphs, precise and unadorned. It said: *I am resubmitting my application with a Competence Vitae alongside the standard CV. The portfolio linked below sets out what I know, what I can do, and where I am still developing. I would ask that you read it before deciding whether to proceed.*

Tanja sat back. Then she clicked the link.

What opened was not a document in any format she recognised from a standard application. It was structured around competences rather than chronology – each one named, described in a sentence, and then supported by a layer of evidence she could open or close depending on how much depth she needed. A work reference describing a specific situation. A self-assessed example with context, decision, and outcome. A note about a process the applicant had designed and handed over, with a link to a colleague's account of working inside it. At the bottom of each competence block: a gap, where one existed, marked as *developing* with a note about what she was working towards and how.

She had never seen a job application organised this way. She was not sure what to do with it immediately, which was itself an unusual experience at this stage of a screening process.

She started with the competence that mattered most to the hiring manager: coordination across competing stakeholder interests. There were three layers of evidence. The first was a reference extract – not a generic endorsement but three sentences describing a specific conference where a keynote cancellation four days before the event had been managed without visible disruption and without the client realising how close the event had come to failing. The second was a self-assessment: how she had thought through the problem, the decision she had made about sequencing, what she would do differently. The third was a note from a colleague who had been in the room for part of it, two sentences, specific enough to be credible.

Tanja read all three. Then she read them again.

She had screened for this competence – the hiring manager’s phrase, *someone who can hold things together when everything is pulling in different directions* – across two full rounds of applications. She had not found it named this clearly in any standard CV, because standard CVs did not name it. They named job titles and sectors and years of experience, from which she was supposed to infer that the competence existed somewhere underneath. Sometimes the inference was correct. Often it was not. She had hired people on the strength of an inference and found out, three months in, that the job title had not meant what she thought it meant.

She moved through the rest of the portfolio. The cross-sector profile that had filtered this application out in the first round – fifteen years in one sector, non-standard trajectory, difficult to justify quickly – looked different at this resolution. The work was there: complex, consequential, evidence-backed. A process built from scratch. A mentoring relationship documented with something approaching precision. Three years of voluntary coordination work that had been, in the original CV, a two-line footnote she had almost missed in the first round, and that now, in the *Competence Vitae*, described exactly the kind of work the role required.

She slowed down. The portfolio demanded it. Unlike a CV – which could be absorbed in under two minutes, its signals processed almost automatically – this required sustained attention. She moved between sections, followed links, read references that pointed to specific situations rather than general endorsements. The non-linear structure was initially disorienting. She kept having to resist the instinct to look for the familiar markers: last employer, most recent title, years in sector.

But the information it contained was exactly what she had always struggled to extract from a standard application. She did not have to infer capability from proximity. The capability was named, evidenced, and specific.

She pulled up the original application from three months earlier. The same person. Set aside in the first round. The competences had been there then – invisible, buried beneath job titles and sector labels the process had no mechanism to look past.

She thought about what hiring this way consistently would require. Reading a competence portfolio took time and a willingness to work with qualitative information that did not sort itself neatly. Following links, weighing evidence, holding a non-linear picture in mind – more demanding than processing a stack of CVs, and the time pressure had not gone away.

But what it offered in return was a clearer picture of demonstrated capability than she had ever been able to extract from a standard application. A hiring process built around this could surface non-linear careers, informal learning, work that employment records did not capture. And beyond hiring: a clearer internal picture of what skills already existed in the company, where the real gaps were, what development should target.

She had said as much to the hiring manager two months ago. She had not, at that point, seen it demonstrated. She was seeing it now.

She forwarded the application with a note: *This one is different. The portfolio gives me what I have always struggled to extract from a standard CV. I think we should meet her.*

Then she opened her calendar and scheduled the interview.

She did not know what the conversation would produce – whether the person on paper would be the person in the room, whether the role would be the right fit, whether the company was ready for someone who had built her capabilities in contexts they were not accustomed to recognising. Those were real uncertainties. A strong portfolio guaranteed nothing beyond a conversation worth having.

But that was what she was offering. A conversation. The previous process, run correctly and professionally, would never have given it to her.

She looked at the original application one more time. Three months ago. Read three times, set aside anyway. A decision she could defend and could not quite stand behind.

She closed the file and went to find the hiring manager.

Nour

The email arrived at 11:43 on a Thursday morning.

Thank you for your application. We would like to invite you to an interview.

She read it twice. Then set her phone face-down on the table and left it there for a while.

It was not an offer. She knew that. An interview was a beginning, not an ending – a door opened, not walked through. What came next would depend on things she could not yet know: the room, the questions, the people across the table, whether what she had to offer matched what they actually needed when they saw it in person.

But something was different this time, and she did not want to move past it too quickly.

She opened her laptop and looked at the portfolio – not to change anything, just to look. The competences she had named over two weeks of careful work. The evidence she had tracked down, piece by piece. The volunteer work that had almost not made it in. The gaps she had marked honestly rather than filled with words that could not be supported. The whole picture, assembled from contexts she had spent months being told, implicitly and explicitly, did not count.

They counted – not as a reassurance someone had offered her, but as something she had worked out herself, by building it. Fifteen years of event management, yes – but also the informal learning, the unpaid work, the commitments outside her job

that had looked like distractions and turned out to be foundations. All of it real. All of it hers.



She thought about the evening months ago when she sat at her desk reading her CV slowly, the way you read something written by someone you no longer quite recognise. *Is this really all I am?* The question had felt devastating then. It felt different now – not answered, exactly, but dissolved. The CV had never been all she was. It had simply been all the instrument could carry.

She had a better instrument now. She had used it. Whatever happened next, that was not nothing.

She closed the laptop. Outside, Switzerland looked exactly as it always did – orderly, unhurried, the mountains where they were supposed to be. She had an interview scheduled. She did not know what came next. Clarity, not certainty.

She picked up her coat and went out.

Key insights: From Curriculum Vitae to Competence Vitae

Nour, Tanja, Bernadette, Marco, and Stefan each learned something in this story – not the same thing, and not in the same way. Here is what they found, and what it might mean beyond this novel.

1. Competences are more than skills



Common assumption: Skills are what you can do. List them, and you have described your competence.

New perspective: Competences combine knowledge, skills, and attitudes – what you know, what you can do, and what you value. Strip out any one dimension and the picture becomes misleading. A person can know how to run a stakeholder meeting and still fail to do it well – because they lack the judgement, the patience, or the situational awareness the role demands. Competence is multidimensional by definition. Skills lists are not.

“We have spent decades arguing about what competence means,” Bernadette says. “But the core insight is simple: it is never just what you know, and never just what you can do. The attitude – what you care enough to act on – is what holds it together. Without that, you have a list, not a person.”

To read further: Hartig & Klieme (2006) offer a precise account of what competence means as a diagnostic concept – and why the distinction between knowledge, skill, and disposition matters practically, not just theoretically. Dilger & Strate (2025) show how AI-supported competence portfolios can link individual competences, continuing education offers, and labour market requirements.

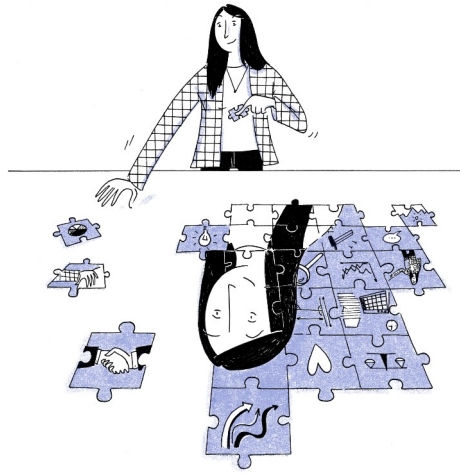
Dilger, B., & Strate, M. (2025). Brückenbau zwischen individuellen Kompetenzen, Weiterbildungsangeboten und Anforderungen auf dem Arbeitsmarkt durch KI-gestützte Kompetenzportfolios in der beruflichen Weiterbildung. *bwp@ Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik – online*, 48, 1–19.

https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe48/dilger_strate_bwpat48.pdf

Hartig, J., & Klieme, E. (2006). Kompetenz und Kompetenzdiagnostik. In K. Schweizer (Ed.), *Leistung und Leistungsdiagnostik* (pp. 127–143). Springer.

https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-33020-8_9

2. The Curriculum Vitae shows where you have been, but only in a limited way what you know, can do, and value



Common assumption: A well-written CV is a reliable indicator of a candidate's capability.

New perspective: The CV is a chronological record of positions held, qualifications obtained, and sectors worked in. It communicates trajectory, not capability. Competences acquired informally – through civic engagement, non-linear careers, or work that carries no job title – remain largely invisible in standard CV formats. Screening primarily by CV means

systematically filtering for familiarity rather than ability. The two are not the same thing.

“She may well be a strong candidate,” Tanja says. “But I could not prove it from the CV. That was the problem. And the problem was not hers.”

To read further: Häcker (2005) makes the case for portfolio-based documentation as an alternative to credential-only records – one of the foundational arguments behind the Competence Vitae. The OECD (2024) provides empirical grounding: employers in five European countries report widespread gaps between the skills their work requires and the skills their workforce has.

Häcker, T. (2005). Portfolio als Instrument der Kompetenzdarstellung und reflexiven Lernprozesssteuerung. bwp@Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik – online, 8.
https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe8/haecker_bwpat8.pdf

OECD. (2024). *Understanding Skill Gaps in Firms: Results of the PLAAC Employer Module*. OECD Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.1787/b388d1da-en>

3. Competences develop across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts



Common assumption: Learning that counts happens in formal settings: schools, universities, certified programmes.

New perspective: Competences develop across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. Someone who has managed a volunteer team, navigated a complex care situation, or built a skill through sustained self-directed practice has learned something real and transferable. The problem is not the quality of that learning – it is the absence of tools to make it legible to

others. Visibility is an infrastructure problem, not a personal failing.

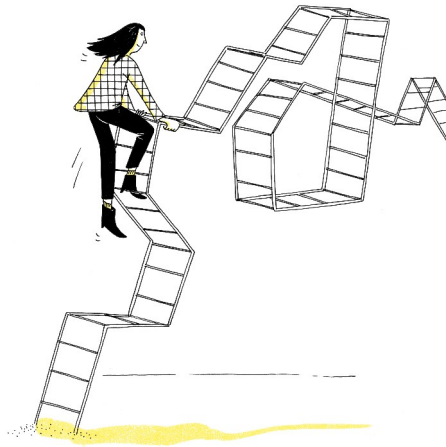
“We keep asking which course someone completed,” Stefan says. “We rarely ask what they learned from everything else they did. That gap belongs to us, the providers, not to the learners.”

To read further: Johnson & Majewska (2022) clarify what formal, non-formal, and informal learning mean as categories – and why the distinctions matter for anyone trying to document competences built outside classroom settings. Siegel, Lohner & Arnold (2025) examine how teaching portfolios supported by digital tools for thought can make self-directed professional learning in higher education visible.

Johnson, M., & Majewska, D. (2022). *Formal, non-formal, and informal learning: What are they, and how can we research them?* Cambridge University Press & Assessment Research Report.
<https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/665425-formal-non-formal-and-informal-learning-what-are-they-and-how-can-we-research-them-.pdf>

Siegel, S. T., Lohner, D., & Arnold, M. (2025). Reimagining Teaching Portfolios Through Personal Knowledge Management with Digital Tools for Thought. *Zeitschrift für Hochschulentwicklung*, 20(3), 231–258. <https://doi.org/10.21240/zfhe/20-3/11>

4. “Successful” careers can also follow a non-linear path



Common assumption: A successful career moves upward. Progress means promotion along a clearly defined vertical path.

New perspective: Careers develop across changing roles, contexts, and tasks. Lateral moves, temporary exits, shifts in responsibility, deliberate steps in unexpected directions – these are not failures of ambition. They are often precisely how competence grows. A ladder allows movement in one direction and makes stepping off it costly. A grid allows movement in any direction, by design. In a labour market shaped by structural

change, non-linear paths are not unusual. They are increasingly common.

“I kept thinking I had fallen behind,” Nour says. “Then I stopped measuring myself against a line I never chose. What I had built was not a gap – it was range.”

To read further: Helvey (2016) argues that lateral moves build capabilities that vertical promotion does not, and that employers underestimate how many employees want them. Fenski (2024) introduces the career grid as a practical planning concept, with attention to both equity and resilience in changing labour markets.

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5. “Work” is more than wage labour



Common assumption: Work is what you are paid for. Everything else – care, volunteering, self-directed learning, community engagement – belongs to a different, less relevant domain.

New perspective: Competence can develop wherever people act, decide, take responsibility, and reflect. Care work, civic engagement, and self-organised learning are not peripheral to (professional) capability. They are often where the most transferable competences are forged: managing competing

demands under pressure, sustaining commitment without external structure, coordinating across differences. A *Competence Vitae* that ignores these contexts does not capture the whole person. Neither does a hiring process built around the same blind spot.

“The volunteer work nearly didn’t make it in,” Nour says. “I wasn’t sure it counted. That hesitation – that was the problem in miniature. Not the work. What we’ve been taught to think of as work.”

To read further: Haug (2017) examines what an expanded conception of work – one that includes unpaid and care-based activity – means for how we think about capability and contribution. Rusinek (2023) connects the future of work to broader questions of sustainability and what a labour market that recognises the full range of human activity might look like.

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Rusinek, H. (2023). *Work-Survive-Balance: Warum die Zukunft der Arbeit die Zukunft unserer Erde ist*. Herder.

Final thoughts

The concepts and tools to support this shift are being developed. The research is underway, the frameworks are being tested, the conversations are happening – in institutions, in hiring departments, in guidance sessions, and in rooms where people are trying to name what they know.

The shift from Curriculum Vitae to Competence Vitae is not a change of document format. It is a reorientation – away from *where have you been?* towards *what do you know, what can you do, and what do you value?* That question is harder to answer. It demands reflection, evidence, and honesty from everyone involved: individuals willing to look beyond their job titles, employers willing to look beyond familiar signals, and education providers willing to ask whether their credentials actually correspond to the competences their learners have built.

None of that is finished. The rest depends on what you do with it.

The research behind this story

This novel draws on scientific research conducted in a subproject led by the Institute of Business Education and Educational Management (IWP) at the University of St.Gallen within the **Innosuisse Flagship Initiative: Swiss Circular Economy of Skills and Competences**. The Flagship brought together leading institutions such as the University of St.Gallen (HSG), University of Zurich (UZH), École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training (SFUVET), and Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW). Practical implementation was achieved through close collaboration with key industry associations, including the Association of the Swiss Technology Industry (Swissmem), swissICT, and the Employers' Association of Swiss Banks.

The project built tools and frameworks to help individuals document and present competences across formal and informal contexts, supported education providers in developing evidence-based learning pathways, and worked to close the gap between individual capability and labour market legibility.

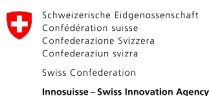
Full project documentation, publications, and resources:

<https://iwp.unisg.ch/de/forschung/berufliche-bildung/projekte/innosuisse-flagship-initiative/>

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About the authors & illustrator



Dr. Stefan T. Siegel is a Senior Postdoctoral Researcher, Lecturer, and Project Leader at the Institute of Business Education and Educational Management (IWP), University of St.Gallen (HSG). His work focuses on evidence-informed education, teacher professionalisation, educational mythbusting, and sustainability education. He has authored numerous national and international publications.



Dr. Marco Strate is a Research Associate at the IWP, University of St.Gallen, where he collaborates on projects that bridge theory and practice. Having started out with a commercial apprenticeship, he knows that careers do not always follow a straight line. His role in the Innosuisse Flagship Project involved translating abstract ideas into practical models, such as the Competence Vitae.



Prof. Dr. Bernadette Dilger is a Professor of Business Education at the IWP, University of St.Gallen. As a project leader in the Innosuisse Flagship Project, she challenges traditional career narratives and advocates for a holistic understanding of competence – one that values experience, reflection, and diverse learning contexts.



Pia Valär is a freelance illustrator based in Zurich. Her work spans books, editorial projects, visual storytelling, and interdisciplinary collaborations. She often combines humour, poetry, and thoughtful observation. In her work, she is also interested in exploring how complex content can be translated into engaging visual narratives for a broader audience.

The CV tells a story. But is it the right one?

Degrees. Job titles. Years of experience.

For decades, the Curriculum Vitae has structured how we judge people's value in the labour market. It feels objective. Rational. Efficient.

And yet – mismatches persist. Competences remain invisible. Careers stall. Employers complain about skill shortages while capable people are often filtered out.

This illustrated science short novel invites readers into a different way of thinking.

Through the intertwined stories of a mid-career event manager, a pressured recruiter, and researchers and an education provider questioning long-held assumptions, the story explores a simple idea: competences are not trophies collected along a linear ladder. They are relational, developmental, and deeply tied to diverse tasks and contexts.

What if we stopped asking *Where have you worked?* And started asking *What do you know, what can you do, and what do you value – and under which conditions?*

Grounded in the Swiss labour market and education system, and informed by current research, this book introduces the concept of the *Competence Vitae*.

