Organizing careers for work – The curriculum vitae (CV) in Prussia’s technical bureaucracy, c. 1770-1830

Stephan Strunz
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Institut für deutsche Literatur, Berlin, Germany

**ABSTRACT**
This paper explores the history of the curriculum vitae (CV) as a medium of job application in the Prussian technical bureaucracy around 1800. A document that so far has not received much attention in historiographical works, appeared as a major tool for bureaucratic innovation at the end of the eighteenth century. Drawing on primary archival sources, this paper will raise three major points. First, the curriculum vitae facilitated the depiction of ‘careers’: linear sequences of professional formation pointing toward certain positions. It helped applicants stylize their education and employment history as a time of continuous progress and merit, i.e. a veritable career. Second, the CV enabled the organization and control of personnel in a large-scale administrative body. Administrators used the CV as a tool to familiarize themselves with unknown persons and place them to positions according to their past professional trajectory. Finally, the lives recounted in CVs did not correspond to the contemporary concept of self-reflexive Bildung but were embedded in a utilitarian discourse of usefulness. In this vein, only those biographical events mattered for a CV that were useful for the state and pertained to the professional formation of the subject.

**KEYWORDS**
Curriculum vitae; cv; bureaucracy; career; human resource management; documents

1. Introduction

May your Excellency deign to receive my request, with which I most respectfully approach. It concerns the gracious bestowal of the 4th road engineer post, which was vacated through the death of the engineer Brix in Montjoie. I do not neglect hereby to present to your Excellency most submissively my Curriculum vitae attached as proof that I have rendered some services to the state.¹

With these words a young road engineer, Leopold Ilse, opened his application letter addressed to the Prussian Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Construction in 1824. Although old-fashioned in rhetoric, this letter adopted a highly innovative approach to the problem of job application. Whereas in the early nineteenth century most applicants for the civil service still presented themselves by means of a supplication letter or petition (Supplikation), Ilse attached a new type of document to his petition that only much later would become the paradigmatic medium of the job application process. His ‘Curriculum
vitae’ consisted of a separate document detailing each formative step (starting from early childhood tutoring) up to his current position as a construction site manager of the Aachen theater. His narrative neatly fulfills the modern definition of the curriculum vitae as a ‘brief account of one’s career’ (OED Online 2019). Such documents, however, ubiquitously used in the professional world today, were cutting-edge bureaucratic technology at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century.

In this article, I will take a closer look at the evolution of this document type. Through the historical lens of the Prussian administration, I will demonstrate how the curriculum vitae both transformed conceptions of professional subjectivity and revolutionized contemporary human resource management. The CV allowed for the presentation of life as a career, as a short sequence of professionally formative time periods. Careers thus not only represent the standard sequence of positions achievable in an organization (McKinlay 2002, 2013), but constitute rhetorical tropes contingent on forms such as the CV. In this sense, a CV is the prime medium for the depiction of a career. Second, by rendering lives as careers, i.e. trajectories leading toward specific future positions, the CV also allowed for the integration of the individual into complex administrative organizations. By rendering certain ‘parts of persons’ (Weick 1979, 13) visible, organizations could gain a new hold on the individual. In fact, the entire process of organizing personnel in Prussia hinged on files such like CVs and their adjacent paperwork. Finally, the advent of the CV also indicated a major rift in the discourse of contemporary subjectivity. While most historiographical works stress the predominance of education and self-realization (Bildung) for early nineteenth century selfhood in Germany, the narratives depicted in Prussian CVs testify to a discourse that placed the usefulness of the self above the idea of self-realization, usually associated with the concept of Bildung.

2. The missing history of the curriculum vitae

2.1 Literature review

Curiously, the material document of the CV has received little attention from literary studies or in historiographical works. The opposite holds true for business and communication studies, although much of this research typically is normative or prescriptive in nature (Keulen and Kroeze 2012) and assesses why and for what reasons certain types of resumés are successful in applications and others are not (Martin-Lacroux and Lacroux 2017; Kang et al. 2016; Apers and Derous 2017). This tendency is mirrored in the abundance of managerial textbooks that teach students how to compose a proper CV.

In the German context, the CV is either simply equated with the sociological concept of the ‘life course’ (Bark 1989; Kohli 1978, 1988; Stichweh 1998), interpreted as a ‘text type’ (Anderson and Anderson 1997; Heinemann 2000) with transhistorical features (Fries 1986; Morello 2006), or welcomed as a helpful ‘source’ for social history (Müller-Botsch 2008). A recent handbook article concluded that the CV represents a ‘highly conventionalized' form of autobiography that reduces ‘biographies and individual skills for the purpose of comparibility and measurement’ (Blöbaum 2019, 537).

In line with the general lack of historical analysis in organization studies (Clark and Rowlinson 2004; Kieser 1994), only few studies have examined the CV in its historical dimension. In a brief lecture on the academic CV, Eva Forsberg recently posited that the
‘professional use of the CV’ emerged ‘not until the second half of the twentieth century’ (Forsberg 2016, 1). Scholars in management history and technical writing, on the other hand, have pointed to the fact that the CV or resumé in the U.S. dates back to managerial training and pedagogy in the early twentieth century (Popken 1999; Peagler and Yancey 2005; Killoran 2009). There it was soon institutionalized in business schools and disseminated in textbooks (Popken 1999, 95). Finally, a study by Valentina dal Cin has demonstrated that *curricula vitae* had already been in use during the Napoleonic period in Venice (Dal Cin 2017). Other than these cursory surveys, to date no systematic historiography of the *curriculum vitae* has been undertaken. A major reason for the absence of research might be that the CV is usually contextualized as a genre specific to business administration and the private sector more generally. As my findings demonstrate, the genealogy of the CV must instead be constructed from the vantage point of state administration, from where it only later disseminated into the business world. In order to shed light on the much-neglected history of this form, I will provide a brief history of the *curriculum vitae* (or Lebenslauf in German) as a document in job applications in the Prussian civil service in the years around around 1800.

### 2.2 Theoretical and methodological approach

As Raymond Williams notes on the conceptual history of the term ‘career,’ the notion underwent a significant transformation at the end of the eighteenth century. While for the most part used pejoratively in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it gained a positive connotation in the years around 1800. First only applied to an explicit ranking order in civil service, ‘careers’ by the middle of the nineteenth century referred to any sort of ‘progress in a vocation’ (Williams 1985, 53). As organizational historians have observed, the modern career came to the individual employee as an organizational ‘promise’ positing ‘that merit, diligence, and self-discipline would be rewarded by steady progress through a pyramid of grades.’ (McKinlay 2002, 596) Creating careers in organizations meant filling positions not according to seniority or patronage but rather – at least officially – merit, diligence and routine (Savage 1998, 71). This in turn provoked the need for a continuous ‘inspection’ of individuals, assessing their attitudes and character (McKinlay 2002, 598–99). The individual career was both written and controlled by inspectors who filed their entries in ‘personnel ledgers’ (McKinlay and Wilson 2006, 668). By the 1860s, the promise of a career had become a major tool for instilling employee discipline in British companies (Savage 1998, 79–81). According to this view, modern companies set up an ‘objective’ ladder of organizational positions that virtuous individuals, dependent on their personal assessment, could slowly climb.

This understanding is both confirmed and complicated by Niklas Luhmann’s seminal studies on organizational theory, which interprets the career both as a concept of professional subjectivity and an autobiographical project (Luhmann 1994a, Luhmann 2018). Unlike traditional forms of socialization along the lines of birth and estate, modern careers are open and contingent (Stanitzek 1998, 254). Careers as autobiographical constructs are usually composed from the vantage point of the ‘position held at the moment’; they contain ‘positions already attained’ that are claimed as ‘merit justifying claims to consideration’ in the future (Luhmann 2018, 243). Luhmann asserts that careers ‘affect the résumé [Lebenslauf].’ (Luhmann 2018, 76)
As organizational historians have pointed out, however, careers in organizations hardly exist in a void but are bound to archival media such as personal files, ledgers, or photos (McKinlay 2013, 142). As my research suggests, the causal nexus between career and curriculum vitae must therefore be inverted: it is not so much the conceptual or organizational form of the career that affects the CV, but the rhetoric presentation in a curriculum vitae that establishes careers both on paper and in organizations.

Broadly following the guidelines of cultural history, this study will examine less the social or economic reality behind the CV (e.g. the criteria of success for applications, the economic or social background of applicants, the source-value of CVs for social history) than the epistemological implications of the form itself (McKinlay 2013, 141). A history of the CV must investigate not only the usage of short life narratives that are specifically formatted to attain positions, promotions, or pensions in state bureaucracies, but also the means by which such narratives are materialized and mediated. Such a genealogy must inevitably revolve around the role of documents as constructive entities of bureaucratic organizations (Hull 2012; Gitelman 2014; Brookes and Dunk 2018). Documents in administrations operate as ‘genres of organizational communication’ (Yates and Orlikowski 1992), or, more precisely, ‘organizational records’ (Foscarini 2015). They constitute ‘typified communicative action invoked in response to a recurrent situation [...] characterized by similar substance and form’ (Yates and Orlikowski 1992, 302). In this vein, documents do not so much represent an objective bureaucratic reality as they shape, through their materiality and rhetoric, the ways in which organizational problems such as careers can be perceived and judged in the first place. In accordance with these methodological insights, CVs are not simply ‘red tape’ but constitute forms essential for the organization of personnel in administrations.

### 2.3 Sources

The empirical data of this paper were obtained from primary sources of the various German national and provincial state archives where files from the former Prussian state administration are held. Most CVs presented in this study stem from the technical administration. The recruiting practices of the technical administration have not been systematically researched to date. Nevertheless, they provide an intriguing field of investigation, as the Prussian building administration was one of the major sites where recruiting standards based on competence (Kenntnisse) and usefulness (Brauchbarkeit) were institutionalized as early as in the 1770s. On the other hand, this also constitutes a methodological bias as recruiting practices in the military or higher civil administration of the Prussian state around 1800 relied to a much larger extent on informal practices such as recommendation, patronage or clientelism (Winkel 2013; Bernsee 2017). While the bulk of the material presented in this paper stem from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Construction (today held by the Prussian Privy State Archives, GStA PK), some data were also drawn from sources in the provincial state archives in Duisburg (Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westphalen, LA NRW) and Magdeburg (Landesarchiv Sachsen-Anhalt, LASA).

The study will analyze documents used for application processes both by applicants and administrators. From the vantage point of the administrators, single or separate CVs played a major role in re-organization projects. Documents issued in this context are presented in section 3.3. In respect of the applicants, most of the material is comprised of
application letters, which in contemporary terminology were called ‘petitions’ (Suppliken). In certain cases, separate or single CVs could be found and were integrated into the analysis. It is important to note that the CVs of applicants around the time of 1800 were hardly separable from the medium of the application letter. In addition, CVs were sometimes accompanied by recommendation letters of experts within the technical administration or powerful patrons. This, however, will not be the focus of this study.

3. The emergence of CVs in Prussian human resource management, c. 1770-1830

3.1 Hiring in eighteenth and early nineteenth century Prussia

Hiring procedures in Prussia’s administration had been based on compulsory written procedures at the latest since the establishment of the general directory (Generaldirektorium) in 1723. King Frederick William I required all administrative action to be presented to him on paper and ruled as a ‘king of files’ (Vismann 2000, 215). Instead of informal agreements, century-old privileges or patronal bonds, written evidence of qualifications and performance became binding criteria for appointments (Straubel 1998, 149). This development took place simultaneously with the expansion of the state examination system, which by 1800 had covered almost all administrative sectors and laid down binding career regulations for prospective civil servants (Straubel 2010, 507; Neugebauer 2009, 348; Johnson 1975, 218–23). These higher requirements resulted in recruitment practices that, instead of an applicant’s social background, favored his professional qualification (Straubel 2010, 501).

Newer research has shed doubt on this ‘meritocratic’ orientation of the Prussian recruiting system around 1800. Late eighteenth-century advancement in the military seems to have been largely based on patronizing interventions by the aristocracy or the king (Winkel 2013, 228–53). Recruitment into the civil administration was not free of patronage practices either. Unlike Straubel, Bernsee argues that loyalty to the sovereign was more important than individual skill (Bernsee 2017, 69). For Bernsee, this loyalty-based recruiting system changed only around 1800, when patronage and sales of offices were officially banned in the General State Laws for the Prussian States (ALR, 1794). Qualification and merit were then defined as essential requirements for prospective civil servants (Hattenhauer 1970, §70-75). Yet, the Prussian reformers replaced the old system of patronage (based on ‘family, class or traditional solidarity’) with a new one, by creating interrelationships between people of the same ‘disposition’, i.e. based on ‘similar experiences and values’ (Bernsee 2017, 327). It legitimized the reformers’ support for likely minded people by defining them as part of a new meritocratic elite (Bernsee 2017, 327).

At least on the level of application and recruitment rhetoric, an orientation toward individual merit already applies for the post-1770 technical administration. New administrative and pedagogic institutions such as the central building administration (Ober-Bau-Departement); founded in 1770, renamed into Oberbaudeputation in 1804) and the building academy (Bolenz 1994) were designed to cure a fundamental lack of technical and administrative expertise among construction officials (Strecke 2000a, 57–62). From 1770 onward, prospective civil servants had to undergo an examination at the Oberbaudepartement, which checked administrative and technical knowledge. Officials
who could not provide examination records were no longer considered for promotion.\textsuperscript{3} Since the establishment of the building academy in 1799, rigid curricula regulated the education of officials (Strecke 2000b, 34).

In the vein of these developments, the culture of job application changed, too. During the eighteenth century the main medium of application in the civil service were application letters styled as petitions (Suppliken) (Kubiska-Scharl, Pölzl 2013, 181–192).\textsuperscript{4} In such letters it was very common to introduce oneself by means of a short narrative of one’s life (Straubel 1998 36–7, Hünecke 2010, 105). The most widespread arguments in these life narratives were demonstrations of loyalty (e.g. because a person served for many years under one king) or lamentations of the petitioner’s biographical misfortune and affects. Such lamentations were in line with the ‘old emotional style’ of the Ancien Régime (Bernsee 2018). My analysis of several hundred application letters sent to the Prussian technical administration before 1800 confirms this view.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, more and more letters of application found their way into the technical administration that presented the applicant’s education and work experience as an essential argument. Applicants now not only asked for specific positions but legitimized this request with a depiction of their professional life. Between 1770 and 1848, around 30 to 40\% of applicants recurved to such narrative devices, which I consider prototypical CVs. The numbers might not appear significant, at first glance, but many of those petitions were issued by applicants already known to the addressee. In these cases, the need to narrate one’s career was considerably lower. If one considers instead only application letters used for ‘first encounters,’ the proportion is much higher. In application letters sent to the newly established provincial presidents (Oberpräsidenten) after 1815, almost every applicant provided a brief curriculum vitae in his letter, stating age, family background, education and former employment as reasons for (re-)employment in Prussian service.\textsuperscript{5}

Of course, this does not indicate that pleas of loyalty were incompatible with CVs. But in letters, which highlighted the professional life of the subject, testimonies of loyalty or (dis-)affection were slowly replaced by a more ‘meritocratic’ rhetoric. A statistical analysis of prototypical CVs (i.e. application letters or separate documents which stated education and work experience) shows that before the year 1800, more than 60\% of all applicants used pleas of loyalty or (dis-)affection as major arguments. These numbers changed significantly for the period between 1806–1848 when they were only used in 40\% of CVs as the predominant motivation. In comparison, life narratives that highlighted individual merit, education or work experience rose from 30\% (1770–1806) to 60\% (1806–1848). In all these cases the CV was stylized as a linear narrative spanning one to four pages. The tabular arrangement common in today’s CVs was still unusual at the time.

### 3.2 Writing CVs – depicting careers

When Lower Construction Official (Baukondukteur) Thümen applied to Prussian Minister von Voß in 1800 for the position of building inspector (Bauinspektor), he concluded his letter with the desire to be ‘finally admitted into this career with a fixed salary.’ ‘This career’ (diese Carriere) was carefully constructed in the previous sections of his application. Having already been a lower construction official for several years, Thümen summarized an employment history that was designed to make him eligible for promotion.
Starting with an assistant’s job under a senior building inspector, he was soon charged with the independent construction of a public prison (Frohnfeste), followed by another, this time 'very difficult' and 'arduous’ prison construction, which demanded ‘utmost caution.’ By recounting his CV, a story of ever more difficult assignments, increasing routinization and ‘permanent activity,’ he believed to have earned ample credit for a career leap that would allow him promotion to the position of building inspector. 6

Thümen’s example is only one of many that are a testimony to a new medium of applications and semantics of ‘career.’ He constructed his life as a ‘relatively fixed sequence of positional elements that presupposed each other’ (Fischer 1978, 316).

Applicants who composed CVs for entry into the Prussian civil service carefully applied rhetoric strategies to make their professional histories look as career-like as possible. One of the major strategies for such a ‘careerization’ consisted in reformatting events and time periods that obstructed the linear narrative of professional progress. Before its institutionalization, the professional formation of construction officials was often characterized by biographical contingencies (Strecke 2000a, 66). But as early as 1769, we find CVs in which applicants reformatted their life as a history of professional specialization. Johann Christian Huth introduced himself by stressing that he ‘dedicated [him]self since [his] youth to mathematical studies’ and studied ‘land surveying as well as practical architecture under the supervision of an old engineer called Stumpff.’ Then he left the field of construction and worked as a ‘factor [trade agent] at the Royal Prussian Saale river transport company for nine years.’ 7 Yet, he underplayed this apparent departure from the engineering profession by stating that the job allowed him to ‘acquire some knowledge in shipbuilding and hydraulic engineering.’ Afterward, he was ‘devoted to architecture and timber trade, and had some buildings constructed at [his] own or other people’s expense’. Evoking time and again the topic of architecture and construction, Huth tried to cluster loosely connected tasks under one umbrella term. Although having worked in trade for the most part of his life, he sought to make his professional trajectory look like a career in engineering.

Of course, to many applicants it seemed insufficient merely to depict a history of specialization. Career events had to be qualified: the more arduous and taxing the task, the more valuable it was presumed to be for the CV. It comes as no surprise therefore, that applicants whose previous employment history was unknown to the addressee spent much effort in explaining and praising their past accomplishments. Career narratives were often interlaced with stories of merit and outstanding achievements (Pérez and Sabelis 2019, 13).

Consider the application of Lower Construction Official Saher in 1820. Applying for the position of building inspector, he narrated his professional life as a succession of extraordinarily useful activities. Under his ‘technical direction’ the university building in Erlangen was ‘partly newly constructed, partly newly refurbished’ but, as he put it, definitely ‘improved in taste.’ And ‘even though,’ as he apologetically continued, the local topography of the Principality of Bayreuth did ‘not provide much opportunity to excel as a hydraulic engineer [Wasserbaumeister],’ he could benefit from the ‘many excellent representative, civil and economic buildings’ in the region. Studying them with ‘much profit,’ he claimed having become a ‘skillful construction engineer [Landbaumeister].’ When the committee for the erection of a Silesian war monument called for submissions, he ‘sent a well-done drawing designed by [himself]’ that was ‘well
received for its originality.’ Finally, Saher even portrayed himself as the sagacious inventor, namely of a means ‘to pull a ship against the current of the most torrential river without animal or steam power.’\(^8\) In total, his professional trajectory was stylized as the career of a diligent employee who not only accomplished his assigned tasks but set himself apart from his peers by praiseworthy extracurricular activities.

A final means of evoking a career-like trajectory was to stylize one’s life as a constant battle against hostile forces, or, in Luhmann’s terminology, as a clash of personal selection and external selection (Luhmann 1994a, 195). In such letters, applicants would usually express absolute dedication to a specific career and then contrast this dedication with a myriad of obstacles put in their way. Construction Apprentice (Baulevele) Wieczoreck, for example, recounts the beginning of his professional life as a time of effort, hope, and aspiration. Being sent to the Petrikau War and Domains Board (Kriegs- und Domänenkammer) in 1797, he was at first charged with ‘various tasks’ to which he sought to apply himself with ‘honesty and diligence […] in order to not only fulfil the final purpose of my employment but also to gain knowledge that would be adequate for my future promotion.’ ‘Yet,’ as he exclaimed in his CV, external forces interfered in his career plans, and he was ‘after a while employed not much and, in the end, not at all.’ Puzzling over the reasons for this negligence, Wieczoreck could not but express anger and consternation, not least because ‘I see my entire career [Laufbahn] wrecked.’ Consequently, his letter ended with pleas for professional reinstatement. His demands for a job as a senior building inspector’s assistant and ‘new tasks and surveys’ figure as vehicles to bring him back on track. With these assignments granted, the official believed it possible to eventually ‘approach the final purpose of my destination,’ a destination befitting the career of a proper construction official.\(^9\) This complaint about external forces interfering with the natural course of a career highlights the fact that applicants conceived of careers as quasi-automatic trajectories. Once begun, a career was claimed as a sort of natural right to professional advancement.

All these ‘careerization’ strategies must be placed against the backdrop of technical professionalization. Until the end of the century, the training of young engineers was still in line with traditional methods of education: prospective engineers were usually trained by an experienced master, the quality of the training depended heavily on the charisma, status and teaching skills of the mentor (Strecke 2000a, 118). The building academy, founded in 1799, can be considered a pedagogical caesura in this respect. Not only did it standardize the training of civil servants in a uniform curriculum, it also compartmentalized the training into specific sub-disciplines (Bolenz 1994, 110–114). Depictions of professional specialization in CVs must be considered in the light of this development. At the same time, construction engineers were firmly rooted in cameralist doctrines of social ranking (Bolenz 1994, 114). According to this thinking, an individual was supposed to be granted the ‘reward he “merited” [verdient] by virtue of the “service” [Verdienst] he rendered’ (La Vopa 1988, 172) to society. CVs thus were tools that conveyed to its addressees useful services or merits an applicant had performed for the state. Even if such a merit-orientation might not have been highly competitive or quantified around 1800 (Verheyen 2018, 99–126), we find ample evidence of a competitive awareness among construction officials. By highlighting arduous tasks or outstanding construction, civil servants in their CVs tried to set themselves apart from their peers.
Ultimately, it is important to keep in mind that strategies highlighting the individual’s career and merits often did not transcend the realm of rhetoric. As much as the curriculum vitae appears to be a meritocratic recruitment instrument, applicants did not fail to integrate institutional back channels into their letters. On the one hand, prospective civil servants often submitted their application letters by explicitly mentioning certain superiors, patrons, or acquaintances who, with the authority of their competence or decision-making power, were to guarantee the applicant’s merits. The fact that the addressee was known to a legitimate expert or decision-maker evoked a sense of trust in the addressee that unknown applicants could not claim. On the other hand, applicants also attached third party references to their letters, in which the career narrative of the subject were duplicated or supplemented. These references should prove that the applicant was indeed as efficient as he claimed to be.

The lack of recommendation letters or references might be one reason why, except for Huth, none of the applicants introduced in this section were successful. The reasons given by the officials varied, the decision-makers criticized a lack of formal examination (Thümen) or poor performance noted by superiors (Wieczoreck). Even when the authorities’ evaluations concurred with the candidates’ self-depiction, senior staff could still decline an application on other grounds. In Saher’s case, for example, the ministry acknowledged his overall ability and diligence but rejected him because of his inability to direct subordinate workers. In the end, both documented and undocumented internal evaluations and patronage alliances were so ubiquitous and complex that we can only confirm Luhmann’s analysis of hiring decisions. Because rational decision-making is always obfuscated by informal patronage structures, ‘how decisions really come about cannot be established.’ (Luhmann 2018, 241)

3.3 Becoming known through CVs

Aside from the depiction of their careers, the second major reason that induced applicants to narrate their lives in detail was the need to become ‘known’ to senior administrative staff. An(y) individual who wants to be regarded as an eligible person by an organization must make herself ‘known’ to it (Luhmann 1994b, 32). Unlike individuals, organizations do not see persons according to their bodily or cognitive capacities. Instead, they operate as ‘black boxes’ destined for communication (Luhmann 2018, 67). The transformation of individuals into persons is an essential prerequisite for organizational communication because only persons can be analyzed into relevant aspects ‘such as [. . .] competencies, career intention, motivation, and disciplinability’ (Baecker 2003, 153), which then are applicable to specific organizational positions. As those positions are defined by a set of ‘roles, competences and qualifications’ (Baecker 2003, 153), they can be synched with certain aspects of a person. There is an inseparable link between the process of becoming known to an organization as a ‘professional person’ and the usage of a curriculum vitae.

In Prussia, large reorganization projects, which required the restaffing of several positions at a time, provide a case in point. In 1797 the General Directory ordered the restructuring of the Potsdam Magistrate according to the newly established division between justice (Justiz) and police (Policey) administration. In order to fill two vacant police positions, the privy councilors (Geheime Räte) in charge, Meinhart and Rudolphi, had to screen a total of 12 applications. The central tool for assessing
the suitability of the individual for the organization were the curricula vitae submitted by the applicants. From the outset, the councilors excluded those supplicants who had ‘not become known’ and of whom ‘judgment was therefore suspended.’ In this case, ‘not known’ (nicht bekannt) indicated the absence of further career documentation as well as the lack of oral recommendation. Similarly, candidates whose oral examination was impossible due to the ‘short time’ were not included in the evaluation. Rudolphi and Meinhart finally assessed the remaining four candidates by means of their curricula vitae and the oral examination. The CVs thus allowed for the integration of hitherto unknown individuals into an organization;
they drew a constitutive distinction between those who, in general, could become part of the organization, and those that had to stay outside of it (Luhmann 2018, 81).

An even larger macro-organizational restructuring took place in the years following the defeat of Napoleon. Large parts of the Rhenish lands, for instance, came under Prussian rule for the first time and many new administrative positions had to be created and filled with suitable candidates. Applicants were well-aware that organizers required detailed biographical data for such a colossal task. In application letters sent to the newly established president of the province Jülich-Cleves-Berg, Friedrich von Solms-Laubach, almost every applicant introduced himself with a short life narrative, some even with a separate *curriculum vitae*. As most of the applicants were former French subjects, few were acquainted with the Prussian administrative elite, who allocated positions in the provinces. Unlike the brief narratives submitted by staff that was already working under the administration,17 these CVs were at times quite extensive, running three or more pages. Lacking former employment histories and acquaintances in Prussia, these subjects were keen to assert their affinity with Prussia by other means. They either highlighted voluntary military service during the Wars of Liberation or opposition (although mostly in spirit) to French rule. Becoming known in these cases meant presenting oneself as
a patriotic subject ready to sacrifice one’s life for the fatherland (James 2010, 53–54). Given the turbulence of the times, this was a complex task at times, which at times required some rhetorical maneuvering. A former tailor and lieutenant, for example, was recommended by a senior military official who at the same time drafted a CV for his protégé. In this CV, the colonel apologized for his client’s stay in Paris during the French Revolution by stating that he was ‘forced to take part in the storming of the Bastille.’ To remedy this lack of patriotic orientation, the colonel was keen to assert his protégé’s death-defying patriotic sentiments during the Wars of Liberation, when he helped smuggle prisoners of war out of France into Prussia.18

A recurring pattern in the CVs submitted after the Congress of Vienna were the aspirations applicants attributed to the process of ‘organization.’ ‘Organization’ in these letters referred to the abolition of the old ‘order of things’19 and the dawn of a new age of prosperity and professional advancement under Prussian rule. In this way applicants were anticipating the upcoming administrative reorganization. While the period of French rule was sometimes portrayed as highly disadvantageous for the career prospects of unemployed ‘Germans’,20 the time of ‘organization’ offered ‘prospects in the future’ and ‘hope to be reemployed in the patriotic organization of the justice department.’21 Other more fortunate employees feared the potential upheavals of ‘organization.’ Those officials that met with success under the French administration expressed concern about the ‘imminent organization,’ and asked for posts ‘in order to not become breadless.’22 In any case, the event of organization seemed to have instilled in applicants the urge to narrate their lives in great detail. As a decisive historical interruption, it provoked detailed depictions of former (un-)employment histories. The CV amounted to a biography which, through the process of organization, was either to be continued or changed. Organizers tried to make use of this function and transformed the CV into a tool for the reorganization of administrative staff itself.

3.4 Organizing personnel with CVs

In the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna, when Prussia had to (re-)consolidate its provincial administration, CVs were not only used by applicants seeking to become known, but also by administrators trying to effectively organize the future administrative personnel. By this, the administrative management sought to reduce ‘ambiguous, uncertain, or equivocal informational inputs’ (Weick 1979, 6). During the establishment of the provincial governments in newly acquired provinces such as Jülich-Cleves-Berg or Saxony, provincial construction councilors (Bauräte) were charged with drafting organizational plans for the building administration.23 Those construction councilors in turn had to present potential construction personnel to the Ministry of the Interior in Berlin. Particularly the newly acquired provinces provided an arena in which CVs included in supplications, reports and tables served to justify the proposed transfers between posts and persons. Tables controlling civil servants based on their behavior (Conduitenlisten) were in use since the reign of Friedrich Wilhelm I. (Hinrichs 1964, 29–31). After the defeat of Napoleon personnel tables were used to re-structure the entire administrative apparatus.

In a report from August 1816 the provincial government in Merseburg suggested both a personnel and administrative reorganization of the Merseburg building administration.
Several personnel changes and new appointments were proposed bearing in mind the former Saxonian staff.

We [have] first and foremost taken into account the existing construction personnel, insofar as such personnel was in any way qualified.\textsuperscript{24}

The reorganization project thus sought to integrate former employees of the Saxon state into the Prussian civil service. Recruitment proposals were not put forward in the linear prose of the report, but via attached tables and CVs. While the tables provided a synoptic overview of the personnel changes, the CVs summarized in detail the previous careers of the former Saxonian construction officials. Tellingly, the CVs submitted by the former employees of Saxony did not contain entire biographies but only those ‘parts of the person’ that related to former positions in the building administration (fig. 1). The ‘table of existing construction officials’ (Verzeichniß der vorgefundenen Baubeamten) on the other hand summarized on only two double pages the CVs of six road construction officers (fig. 2).\textsuperscript{25} Tables and CVs had a specific referential structure in which the extensive CVs provided the basic data for the tables.

On the left-hand side, the table showed the ‘current employment situation’ of the official: Place of residence, position, salary and age. On the right-hand side the table presented a ‘suggestion for future employment.’ It directed the reader from a large column about qualification and future position to future salary and place of residence. Each person thus was analyzed into professionally relevant components. CVs here served as a repository of information about professional experience; information otherwise inaccessible to Prussian officials in Berlin. Combined with another table about vacancies in the provincial building administration of Merseburg, the CVs allowed their readers to virtually transpose suitable officials from Saxonian into Prussian service.\textsuperscript{26}

But CVs could not only be extracted into tables, at times they themselves assumed tabular form. Prototypical forms were administered by the General Directory as early as during the reign of Frederick the Great at the turn of the year 1782/1783, when the provincial War and Domains Boards were charged with drafting a ‘table of all construction officials employed in the province’ (Verzeichnis aller in der Provinz angestellten Baubeamten).\textsuperscript{27} The royal order specified a number of aspects which should be included in this directory ranging from name, place of birth, and date of examination to date of first employment, current employment situation and salary. These aspects were numbered from one to nine and framed as questions (e.g. ‘6., if and where they have been examined’\textsuperscript{28}). In order to compile the table, provincial administrators circulated the royal order as a list of questions among their employees.\textsuperscript{29} Naturally, the officials responded to the questions in differing form, length and detail. After having received all the answers, the board had to distill from each individual account the vital information and insert it into the table.\textsuperscript{30} Read from left to right the table supplied succinct professional trajectories, trajectories, however, that were pre-formatted entirely by the design of the form. Johann Valentin Bühlert’s, for example, rendered his replies as a tabular proto \textit{curriculum vitae}, depicting essential information about his person and career in Prussian service (fig. 3).

Here too, the mind-set of dividing persons into various professional components prevailed. Of course, this table was a far cry from the modern CV as it lacks both coherence and detail. Still, it was much more than a simple list of employees. What is
most striking is the biographical component of the table. Not only did it depict the current position of each official but also the spatio-temporal coordinates that led there. While the date of examination highlighted the completion of professional formation, oath-taking (column no. 8) marked the entry into specific administrative ranks. In this sense, the table presented specific professional trajectories, or careers. The information provided was in turn used by the State Construction Commission to evaluate the competence of provincial officials. This applied especially to cases in which the official was not examined by the State Construction Commission but only by a local construction councilor. Lower construction officials who had not been examined by the commission were no longer considered for promotion to the position of construction engineer or building inspector and, if they applied for such a position, had to re-take the examination in Berlin (Posner 1936, 289–290). The table thus not only rendered transparent multiple careers by creating a synoptic overview, it also helped the central administration oversee employees and steer its staff toward professionalization. In this way, late eighteenth century Prussian personnel management already used a ‘centralized personnel record system to monitor and control individual career paths’ (McKinlay and Wilson 2006, 658), a system previously
attributed to the business firm of the late nineteenth century. It also indicates that a major impulse to increase control over personnel in organizations, at least in central Europe, seems to have come from the state administration and not from private enterprises.

3.5 Discursive reverberations: usefulness vs. ‘Bildung’

In the remaining section of this article I would like to discuss the wider discursive implications of the *curriculum vitae* in late eighteenth and early nineteenth discourse. Remarkably, the life narratives that started to pile up in the Prussian administration in the years around 1800, and the CVs in general, were not written for publication, but for internal procedures. One could call the CV an operative form of writing. As such it is difficult to locate in contemporary public discourse, as its traces were not generally published or discussed. In that sense they stand in stark contrast to contemporary autobiographies.

German autobiographical writing in the years around 1800 was deeply embedded in the discourse of *Bildung*, an educational utopia of ‘individual perfectibility’ through ‘inner cultivation’ (Horlacher 2016, 2). Literary autobiographies and *Bildungsromane* like Goethe’s *Dichtung und Wahrheit* or Moritz’s *Anton Reiser* exhibited the ideal of psychological introspection, universal education and creative self-generation (Koselleck 2006; Voßkamp 1992). The self exhibited in these works was cultivated by roaming the world, reflecting its own status and having a variety of experiences not necessarily confined to schooling or work (Horlacher 2016, 4). None of this seems to be reflected in the CVs of the Prussian administration. Instead, all these life narratives were centered on institutional formation, examination and – most of all – work experience in a specific sector. One of the most frequent attributes applicants used to describe themselves was ‘useful’ (brauchbar).

Even as late as in the 1820s or 1830s, a much older and supposedly dated discourse reverberated in these texts: the pedagogy of usefulness (Brauchbarkeit). Since the end of the seventeenth century, enlightened philosophers had demanded that learning should be undertaken in fields of social utility (Scholz 2002). By the end of the eighteenth century, usefulness and *Bildung* were posited as pedagogical antagonists, mirroring the opposition between philanthropist and humanist anthropological frameworks (Ricken 2006, 293–294). Whereas the goal of humanist *Bildung* was self-development, a useful subject was essentially one that would contribute to society by pursuing a useful vocation (Beruf) (La Vopa 1988, 300). One of the most pertinent tasks for the state consisted in determining which subject was suitable for which vocation (Krünitz 1795, 45–47). Having assessed this already during early adolescence, the state would have to take care that a child’s natural talents and general usefulness were developed through adequate institutional formation (Krünitz 1795, 90). The Philantropist Peter Villaume proposed that useful subjects should focus on a single activity, which, through continuous exercise, they would slowly master (Villaume 1785, 489–491). In the wake of such projects, enlightened states established specialized technical schools such as the Ecole des ponts et chaussées in Paris and, in Berlin, the Mining Academy (Bergakademie, 1770), the Engineering School (Ingenieursschule, 1788), and the Building Academy (Bauakademie, 1799) (Lundgreen 1975, 16–19; Picon 1992). Those institutions premised not on universalist education ideals such as Wilhelm von Humboldt’s gymnasium but on early vocational specialization
The personnel files of the Prussian building administration harbor ample evidence for the essential role of usefulness as a concept of employee’s subjectivity. Both CVs and official reports testify to the salience of ‘usefulness’ in hiring procedures. A temporarily unemployed lower construction official, for instance, portrayed his long-term engagement within Prussian ranks as proof of usefulness. Arguing that ‘over the course of 14 years of practice’ he had ‘become useful to the Prussian state,’ he expressed hope that ‘after so many storms of fate’ he might finally secure his future by reemployment.31 A building inspector applying as hydraulic engineer in Torgau contended that ‘in respect of my usefulness for the position’ there could be ‘no objections.’32 This usefulness was evinced by a number of tasks that were supposed to exclusively qualify him for a career in water engineering: ‘the important harbor construction in Swinemünde’ as well as ‘several other hydraulic structures.’ ‘Practical usefulness in most branches of civil engineering’ was finally also an asset that could be ‘deducted from the personnel files,’ as one official pointed out in his application.33 Indeed, reports on application letters and CVs were full of statements concerning the usefulness of the respective candidate. Positive evaluations almost always emphasized the usefulness of a subject for a specific task. A candidate could be ‘hired as a useful surveyor with utility’,34 ‘serve usefully as a surveyor for domains and farms’,35 or ‘be useful as a construction engineer, especially for district buildings [Landbau].’36 Conversely, officials who were judged ‘not useful’ (nicht brauchbar), usually did not succeed with their application. Ultimately, applicants who wanted to construct a career ladder had to indicate specific usefulness instead of Bildung. Although the administrative elite, inspired by idealist philosophers such as Hegel (1979, § 295), time and again stressed their preference for the latter (Wehnert 1833, 106), the higher officials of at least the technical branches were assessed solely by utilitarian standards. Applicants and employees narrated their lives not as a story of Bildung but of ever-increasing vocational specialization and routinization – a story that fell on sympathetic ears with administrators.

4. Conclusion

At the end of the eighteenth century the curriculum vitae emerged as an innovative tool that changed both conceptions of professional subjectivity and the organization of personnel. In CVs of Prussian construction officials, the depiction of one’s career soon became a major narrative strategy. Careers were thus not only measures implemented by administrators to increase the control over individuals (McKinlay 2002, 611), but rhetorical strategies used by applicants to inscribe themselves into an organization. These strategies were dependent on a specific ‘genre of organizational communication’ (Yates and Orlikowski 1992, 302) which the curriculum vitae provided. In CVs applicants described their professional life as a history of diligent dedication, meritorious deeds and continuous progress (or undeserved neglect). It also helped them to voice pleas of loyalty and affection. Although much of an applicant’s assessment depended on factors unrelated to rhetoric self-stylization (such as organizational patronage and institutional back doors), the CV often sparked administrator’s interest in a hitherto unknown individual and led to
further consideration. Administrators, on the other hand, soon took recourse to this new medium for their own purposes. By requiring staff to submit CVs for routine staff lists and organization projects, it was possible to achieve an improved overview of personnel and assess and evaluate candidates based on their qualifications and career progress. As CVs provided an analytic framework that uncovered useful ‘parts of persons’ (Weick 1979, 13) such as qualification, age, exams, and work experience, they could easily be used to compare individuals based on specific attributes. Individuals unfit to the exigencies of the administration were now identifiable at a glance, even by administrators without first-hand knowledge. Finally, both the individual’s self-depiction in a CV and the administrative utilization of the CV were premised on the concept of usefulness. *Curricula vitae* did not exhibit complex narratives of self-inquiry and introspection but utilitarian trajectories of professional specialization.

The major limitation of this study is its focus on the technical administration. As Bernsee (2017) and Winkel (2013) observed, large parts of the Prussian administration such as the higher offices, the estate leaseholders (Domänenpächter) or the military were subject to sales of offices and patronage practices privileging wealthy persons from the bourgeoisie or the aristocracy (Bernsee 2017, 224–27; Winkel 2013, 228–53). In these sections of the administration, meritocratic instruments such as education and exams were outplayed by nobility, personal connections, or financial power. In the light of this, the developments within the technical administration appear like a laboratory of change, in which new recruitment instruments were implemented much more thoroughly. Since 1770, the sources of the technical administration document almost no case, in which an applicant who did not pass the exam, was awarded a position. To the contrary, new genres of organizational communication such as CVs and tables were used to sort out personnel that did not fit the criteria of a professionalized civil service. To assess whether the technical administration was only an exception in a larger ocean of patronage, future research must carefully examine the personnel records of other branches of the post 1806 administration. Straubel’s research suggests that especially the middle strata of the financial and judicial administration were subject to very similar exigencies since the end of the eighteenth century (Straubel 2010, 507). Hence, it seems plausible that in these branches, too, new instruments such as CVs were used to promote career trajectories and control binding qualification requirements. In addition, comparative case studies will have to assess, whether the CV was used in other European administrations as well. At least for the case of Venice, this seems to have been the case (Dal Cin 2017). In any case, the CV’s history must be traced back to the practices of state administration around 1800 and not, as previously assumed, to organizational communication of early twentieth-century private corporations.

**Notes**

1. ‘Application letter of road engineer Ilse,’ 9 November 1824, in: Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStA PK), Rep. 93 B, Nr. 518, unpagedinated. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from the German are mine.

2. It is important to note here that the debate about whether recruitment into the civil administration of the late eighteenth century was meritocratic or not is not settled. Straubel, who analyzed tens of thousands of hiring records, contends that although
patronage existed, recruitment and promotion decisions in the judicial and financial administration (especially on the provincial level of the so called Kriegs- und Domänenkammern) were in the end based on individual qualification, knowledge and work experience (Straubel 1998, 149, 156–82; 2010, 294).

3. Applications which were rejected because of a lack of examination records can be found for example here: GStA PK, II. HA GD, Abt. 10, Südpreußen, XIII Bestallungss., Nr. 135 Bd. 1; II. HA GD, Abt. 11, Neuostpreußen, I Bestallungss., Nr. 82 Bd. 1; II. HA GD, Abt. 12, Pommern, Tit. XV, Nr. 1, Bd.2; II. HA GD, Abt. 13, Neumark, Bestallungss., Baubediente Nr. 4; II. HA GD, Abt. 30.1, Oberbaudepartement, Nr. 68 I. HA Rep. 93 B, Nr. 500; I. HA Rep. 93 B, Nr. 577; I. HA Rep. 93 B, Nr. 587.

4. A finding also confirmed by a recent study by Valentina dal Cin for the Venetian case (Dal Cin 2017, 85).

5. The examples are countless. During the short interim period of the Province of Jülich-Cleves-Berg (1815–1819) alone, 21 files with application letters were created in the registry of the provincial president. In each of those files I found an average of about 30 applications, most of them containing a separate CV or CV-like section in the application letter. LAV NRW (Rheinland), BR0002 Nr. 1512–1533.

6. ‘Application letter of Lower Construction Official Thümen,’ 15 June 1800, in: GStA PK, II. HA GD, Abt. 10, Südpreußen, XIII Bestallungss., Nr. 135 Bd. 1, unpaginated.

7. ‘Curriculum vitae of Johann Christian Huth,’ 18 January 1769, in: GStA PK, II. HA, Abt. 15, Magdeburg, Bestallungss., Tit. XIII Baubediente, Nr. 1 Bd. 2, fol. 5–6.

8. ‘Application letter of Lower Construction Official Saher,’ 8 August 1820, in: GStA PK, Rep. 93 B, Nr. 577, unpaginated.

9. ‘Application letter of Construction Student Wieczoreck,’ 18 February 1802, in: GStA PK, II. HA, Abt. 10, Südpreußen, XIII Bestallungssachen, Nr. 135 Bd. 1, unpaginated.

10. For example: ‘Application letter of Martin Emanuel Reichhelm,’ 25 December 1780, in: GStA PK, II. HA GD, Abt. 15, Magdeburg, Bestallungssachen, Tit. XIII Baubediente, Nr. 8, Bd. 1, fol. 119; ‘Application letter of building inspector Schmidt,’ 7 July 1822, in: GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 93 B, Nr. 431, unpaginated; ‘Application letter of building inspector Schüler,’ 5 May 1832, in: GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 93 B, Nr. 446, fol. 139.

11. For example: ‘Recommendation letter of Major von Rauch for Building Inspector Elsner,’ 19 May 1815, in: GStA PK, Rep. 74 Abt. K X Nr. 28, fol. 15; ‘Recommendation letter of Prince Radziwiłł for Lower Construction Official Schildner,’ 23 December 1821, in: GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 93 B, Nr. 500, unpaginated; ‘Recommendation letter of Prince Albrecht von Wittgenstein for Lower Building Inspector Graefinghoff,’ 9 May 1830, in: GStA PK I. HA Rep. 93 B, Nr. 530, fol. 123.

12. ‘Rescript of the General Directory to Lower Construction Official Thümen,’ 18 July 1800, in: GStA PK, II. HA, Abt. 10, Südpreußen, XIII Bestallungssachen, Nr. 135 Bd. 1, unpaginated.

13. ‘Rescript of the General Directory to Lower Construction Official Wieczoreck,’ 16 August 1802, in: GStA PK, II. HA Abt. 10, Südpreußen, XIII Bestallungssachen, Nr. 135 Bd. 1, unpaginated.

14. ‘Report of the Provincial Government of Erfurt to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Construction,’ 1820, GStA PK, Rep. 93 B, Nr. 577, unpaginated.

15. ‘Report of the Privy Councilors Meinhart and Rudolph to the General Directory,’ 11 December 1795, in: GStA PK, II. HA GD, Abt. 14, Kurmark, Tit. ClVI, Sect. G, Nr. 40, Bd 1. On the general tendency to separate justice and police administration in seventeenth and eighteenth century Germany, see Axtmann 1992 (44–47).

16. ‘Report of the Privy Councilors Meinhart and Rudolph to the General Directory,’ 11 December 1795, in: GStA PK, II. HA GD, Abt. 14, Kurmark, Tit. ClVI, Sect. G, Nr. 40, Bd 1.’

17. Application letters submitted by individuals working in the building administration, for example, were in comparison much shorter than the letters of unknown persons submitted to the Oberprüsidenten.

18. ‘Recommendation letter of Colonel v. Rotenburg for former Lieutenant Küss,’ 3 January 1819, in: LAV NRW, BR 1521, fol. 147–148.
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Notes on contributor

Stephan Strunz is a cultural historian and fellow at the Graduiertenkolleg 2190 (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin), where he completed a PhD in Cultural Studies. He holds a MA in Cultural Studies from Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. His doctoral thesis is focused on the history of Prussian personnel management and its paperwork between 1770 and 1848.

ORCID

Stephan Strunz http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1332-1052

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