Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are groups of people who first share a concern, a set of problems, or a deep interest in a topic. Looking to enhance their knowledge in this shared topic, they find that interacting with others regularly builds their understanding and expertise. Working together, they develop tools and practices that help to establish a baseline of knowledge that the group then builds on to solve the problems and issues that bring them together.

What is a community of practice?
- Communities are everywhere, some named and some not
- Primary purpose is to develop knowledge and foster learning
- Consists of the process of creating, expanding, and exchanging knowledge, and developing individual capacities
- Passion and commitment on a topic hold the group together
- Mechanism for developing relationships among the people who share their understanding about an issue

What does a community of practice do?
- Begins with a strategic context
- Becomes an important way of managing knowledge as an asset
- Builds connections within and throughout organizations
- Creates short-term and long-term value for members and their organizations
- Develops a common sense of identity for members

How does it work?
- People self-select participation in a community of practice based upon their passion for the issues
- Boundaries are fuzzy, organization is informal, leadership emerges from within

How is it different from teams, networks, and business units?
- Relationships are based on collegiality, not reporting
- Defined not by tasks but by commitment to exploring the domain and developing and sharing the relevant knowledge
- Gives equal attention to the elements of domain, community, and practice
- The three levels of engagement—core, active, and peripheral—offer different learning opportunities

Taken from Cultivating Communities of Practice by Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder