You’ve been around long enough to know that the Project Management Office is unlikely to have a door and windows. A PMO is less a where than a collection of whos. Sometimes there’s even very little in the way of who attached, and the PMO becomes a sort of what: an abstraction viewed online.

Okay, that sounds like it came out of Alice in Wonderland, but you know what I mean. The development of an entity to oversee project management hasn’t historically been factored into organizational planning the way other functions are: with an allotment of space, budget, phone lines and desks. Instead, where a PMO exists (often within the IT function) it has often been superimposed over the ordinary, silo-like work structures … kind of like the floating grin of an invisible Cheshire Cat. Very often, even the person who is nominally in charge of the PMO has a day job, usually that of a hands-on project manager with many irons in the fire. In inventing the PMO, we in project management recreated the bane of the project manager’s existence: another ill-defined role to take on with foggy scope, ill-defined responsibilities, no authority and tons of accountability at the tail end. Like a traditional project within a weak matrix organization, no one really works for the PMO; they all officially reside somewhere else on the org chart.

Despite this serious handicap, PMOs are beginning to show signs of success. While still rare in many industries, many if not most IT companies have adopted at least token PMOS—and in some cases, full-fledged enterprise-level project powerhouses. Panelists at PMI’s 2003 Symposium revealed how even the first steps that an organization takes to implement a PMO can have dramatic results. They also noted that project management successes achieved within IT tend to “trickle out” into other areas of the organization.

Often the success or failure of minimal PMO implementations rests right where project success rested in the early days of project management: on the shoulders of one extraordinary individual. So while you can implement a PMO that doesn’t have an recognizable where, when it comes to who, you can’t be too picky.

Beyond Heroism
Of course, at the end of every extraordinary effort comes … burnout. So for sustained and sustainable success from a PMO, it’s best to balance the responsibilities between several leaders and co-coordinators. Research for Optimizing Human Capital with a Strategic Project Office reveals that there are some roles that ought to be bottom line for any PMO:

PMO Director. Definitely not a part-time job. With project portfolio management putting the project management function in direct contact with the strategy-makers in the organization, the head of the PMO has heavy responsibilities. Deep background in project management is crucial, of course, but so are executive skills like strategic thinking, financial savvy, and the kind of higher-order communication skills we expect from C-level leaders.

Manager of Project Managers. Not an exciting title, but a role that combines project management experience with the skills to supervise, coach, mentor, develop and recruit top project management talent provides a long-needed interface between corporate HR and real life in the projects. One major insurance company includes a role called the Organizational Development Specialist along with the MPM, whose role the IT PMO Director calls “to float around and make sure everyone’s human needs are being met”—an addition to project life that has had tremendous positive effects on morale and productivity.
Control Freak. Just kidding, but I bet those readers who seriously specialize in project controls won’t mind that title. Multiple and complex projects require the oversight of a highly analytical, deeply experienced master of project management techniques for cost and schedule control. Supervising other cost and schedule controls specialists, our CF keeps the project management ship on course, not one project at a time, but across a portfolio.

Methodology Maven (or Maestro). One of the complaints I’ve heard about PMOs is that they tend to become “methodology police.” But what we have in mind for the MM is more like a combination guru, cheerleader, and librarian. Someone who is both passionate and meticulous and who can build, within the PMO, a community of practice dedicated to changing work habits and project results through the application of a standard methodology. Imposed methodology is rarely sustainable, people being as contrary as they are. But when introduced by someone fascinated with process and dedicated to ease-of-use and knowledge transfer, a methodology can transform a chaotic workplace into a rewarding one. Respondents in our Value of Project Management study noted that one unexpected and welcome side effect of introducing a project management methodology was that morale improved, since team members no longer felt they were constantly in crisis mode on projects.

Project Managers … but Only the Best. The research evidence is piling up that excellent project managers are an organization’s best hope of excelling at projects. As Christopher Sauer of Oxford University has written, “At the heart of organizational project management capability is the company’s ability to empower and support project managers. Individuals do not innovate and advance organizational learning just because to do so improves organizational capability; they do so because human resource policies and the organization’s values encourage them to feel they have a personal stake in helping the organization perform better ...” Implementing such policies—including a competency-based system for recruiting, developing and rewarding best-practice project managers—is a big cultural change, but one with profound effects on turnover, morale and productivity.

IN SHORT, you can host your PMO on a web server and skip building any departmental walls—that sort of virtual and flexible strategy suits the essential nature of a project management center very well. But when it comes to the roles that people must play in order to instill project management culture throughout IT … and eventually, across the enterprise … get out your hammer and nail down the details of roles and responsibilities.