Specialist IT Companies are increasingly seeing their peers not as competitors, but as partners, thanks to the rise of the 'partner-to-partner' model. The increasing complexity of technology is being cited as a key factor behind the partner-to-partner trend, which is being championed by vendors including Microsoft.

One Next 100 VAR that is embracing the philosophy is Q Associates, a hyperconverged infrastructure and cloud specialist which formalised its alliance with security and networking specialist Intuitive Systems & Networks (ISN) this summer. We caught up with Q Associates' business development director, Andy Griffiths (left), and ISN's sales director, Simon Rance (right), to find out how the partnership is benefiting both parties.

What drove the two of you to work together?

AG: Although our deep roots are very well formed around infrastructure and technology integration, we are increasingly providing specialist services to our clients, and occasionally we will be asked to provide services outside our core skill sets. So, some years ago we started to build a network of trusted specialist services organisations who could provide capabilities outside our skill sets. One of those was ISN. We now have Ts and Cs signed between the two organisations so effectively clients can work through either of us. The skill sets are very much complementary and it enables both organisations to provide a broader skill set of trusted services to both client bases.

SR: From ISN's point of view we are always looking to complement our skill sets as a fairly traditional network house. As the network and datacentre space started expanding out into the cloud, that was always our shortfall – it was crying out for a partnership of this nature and Q have filled that role in a key way.

Microsoft and other vendors are aggressively pushing the partner-to-partner collaboration model right now. What is driving that trend?

AG: If you think about things like cloud and mobility, there's been more movement and change in the technology market in the last five years than in the previous 20. And I think as an IT specialist organisation trying to do a professional job for our customers, it quickly becomes apparent that you can't do it all. That's a natural driver then for these trusted partnerships with complementary organisations across the sector.

SR: We at ISN see it very clearly, mainly through our relationship with Cisco, where Cisco at a very high level is announcing strategic partnerships on the Apple range, on the Microsoft range, on the Flexpod solution, etc. As an SME, that can be slightly intimidating. You're trying to punch above your weight, and the only way to do that is it through these kinds of partnerships. If you can do that well, you can then go back to the vendors and say 'actually, we are lined up on all these streams across the portfolio – we can start taking that on'. It then makes you look very powerful when you are putting bids into large corporates in a joined-up manner. That's the biggest benefit we've seen –collectively we are punching way above our weight.

How has the partnership borne fruit so far?

SR: There was a major contractual win between both organisations in Q3 of this year that we can't yet announce publicly, but it brings both organisations closer together in a very large WAN deployment in the public sector. These sorts of things really impress on you the importance of two or three years of groundwork and that doing things the right way pays off, and it has been a massive success for both organisations.

Is this alliance a prelude to even deeper co-operation between the two firms?

AG: The strategy is to form multiple relationships similar to the one we have with ISN, so acquisitions aren't necessarily part of the initial thinking, but as time goes on and if the technologies remain relevant and critical to our customers, that could be something we could look at.

SR: If we can productise what we're doing well and make it very easy to engage with ISN/Q as a team of trusted advisors working together, then that will absolutely benefit customers. As that turns into a product, and bigger and bigger solutions, who knows what will happen.

CRN research indicates that the number of IT suppliers end users are engaging with is rising, and that they are putting an increasing premium on specialisation. Are you seeing that?

AG: Our customers have really welcomed this type of specialist relationship as they would rather work with organisations that really know what they're talking about, rather than people who are giving it their best shot but don't specialise in that area. What they really embrace is that there is now an organisation – Q in most cases – that is actually taking responsibility for the outcome, rather than pointing the finger at multiple suppliers that might be working on a particular contract. And customers see that as a breath of fresh air.