

USING MACHINE TRANSLATION FOR ECOMMERCE A COMPLETE GUIDE

2021



WEGLOT

*"We needed a quick solution to launch our Italian store. Immediate translations accelerated our conversions and let our merchandisers focus on other tasks. **We now have more flexibility and launch available stock much faster.**"*

MATTHIEU GALTIE

HEAD OF DIGITAL
MARKETING, VOLCOM





CAN NEURAL MACHINE TRANSLATION HELP YOU LAUNCH AND CONVERT FASTER?

Ecommerce retail sales boomed in 2020, reaching an all time high of **\$4.206 billion worldwide**. As the pandemic forced marketers to accelerate and grow their digital strategy efficiently with the best tools, it also helped question the traditional ecommerce translation process. Manual translations, perceived as expensive and time-consuming for marketing and digital teams, started becoming old-fashioned, leading to the adoption of neural machine translation and helping teams launch faster and improve their translation workflow.

The purpose of this guide is to help you, as a marketer, understand the evolution and improvement of machine translation and choose the most effective way to carry out a website translation project. Learn how to use it alongside a blend of human translation and how to make machine translation your best ally in your ecommerce translation processes.

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FIRST THINGS FIRST: MOVING BEYOND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT MACHINE TRANSLATION

NO, THE ROBOTS ARE NOT TAKING OVER

We can't get into the benefits (and few drawbacks) of machine translation without first going over – and clearing up – the most common misconceptions.

Machine translation has a bad reputation in some circles, namely those that don't understand it or realize how much it can help businesses, sales and the customer experience.

Part of the reason for that misunderstanding is that it's so technical – to some, it's too technical to grasp, leading to major gaps in knowledge. And even for the tech-savvy business owner, understanding the ins and outs of machine translation means more of a learning curve than they may want or have time for.


Moreover, the thought of a machine translating text and essentially writing copy conjures up images of sci-fi films. The next thought is usually something like, "The robots are taking over – humans will be out of jobs before we know it."

While that may make a good basis for a big-budget flick, it's simply not the case in reality. (We'll get more into why a little later when we discuss how machine and human translations make the perfect partnership.)

The truth is that not only is machine translation not threatening – humans are not being replaced by machines; robots aren't taking over – but today, it works better than ever and can be an enormous help for your ecommerce brand and its bottom line.

To get there, we have to explain why machine translation is hugely beneficial for brands with an international audience. Overall, machine translation is a powerhouse of a tool that allows businesses to reach overseas markets and customers, expanding reach and communication potential.



A black and white photograph of a man in a suit and glasses, looking up at a large, complex machine. The machine has many dials and a paper tape reader. The man is holding a book or document. The image is partially covered by a dark blue vertical bar on the right side.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MACHINE TRANSLATION

WHERE IT STARTED

In this section, we'll cover how machine translation came onto the scene, the improvements and strides it's made, and where the industry is today.

THE BEGINNING: RULES-BASED MACHINE TRANSLATION

THE DICTIONARY

Most people think that machine translation works like this: You define rules and a dictionary for each pair of languages, then apply that information directly for word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence translation.

And yes, that is what machine translation used to be like – but it isn't anymore. Plus, rules-based machine translation (RBMT) didn't actually work very well at all, even though it was probably considered cutting-edge technology at some point.

Language nuances make it almost impossible to accurately translate this way, period.

RBMT was introduced at the start of the 1970s, and Russian translation software company PROMT was one of its main proponents.

There are three forms of RBMT: Direct, transfer-based and interlingua. Each of the forms is a bit different, but they have the same basic functioning when it comes to the tech logic used: A set of grammatical rules is defined, along with a dictionary for each language pair. Those rules are applied word-for-word for translation.

The structure and context of the source text are not taken into consideration, which is why RBMT is so not-nuanced.

Here's what you need to remember about RBMT: Nobody (or nobody in-the-know, at least) handles translation like this anymore.

That type of super-basic translation technology is now antiquated.

Also, PROMT now runs Reverso, a popular machine translation product that uses much more advanced translation technology – they've kept up with the times and moved far beyond RBMT.

THE DEVELOPMENT: STATISTICAL MACHINE TRANSLATION

A NEW, MORE NATURAL WORLD OF MACHINE TRANSLATION

The next wave of machine translation, called statistical machine translation (SMT), breaks down sentences into multiple parts (words, phrases, structures, and/or syntactical arrangements). Then, those parts are compared to all of the examples of similar parts in the library texts.



In general, this means there are more natural-sounding options to choose from, which means there's a better chance of the translated text sounding natural, too. SMT crawls huge libraries of translated text, which is called a corpus. The corpus is made up of human-translated text, which is why the results are more natural than with RBMT. SMT then matches each part of the original language's sentence to the corpus. Next, it takes each of the corpus translations and uses prediction algorithms to narrow down the options.

The one that's chosen is the one that's used most frequently or that seems the best fit for the context. The output (i.e., the translation), therefore, comes from real-life examples, making the results much more accurate and natural than RBMT. SMT isn't perfect – it can still result in not-so-natural translations when there are differences in word usage or sentence structure between languages – but it's much more accurate than RBMT. This sounds pretty good, but it's still not as accurate or reliable as neural machine translation (NMT), which we'll get into next.


THE ACHIEVEMENT: NEURAL MACHINE TRANSLATION

TODAY'S (AND TOMORROW'S) CUTTING-EDGE MACHINE TRANSLATION TECH

Right now, NMT is the most advanced type of machine translation available. Why? Because the technology uses algorithms to teach itself how to recognize the most natural word-phrase combinations for each language.

Like with SMT, this type of translation builds on language that real people have already said or written. As a result, this is the closest simulation to the human brain we have when it comes to machine translation – at least for now.

Think of NMT as SMT on steroids. It harnesses algorithms to teach itself the most natural word and phrase combos for different language pairs. NMT regularly corrects itself, too, in order to get smarter and improve those algorithms.

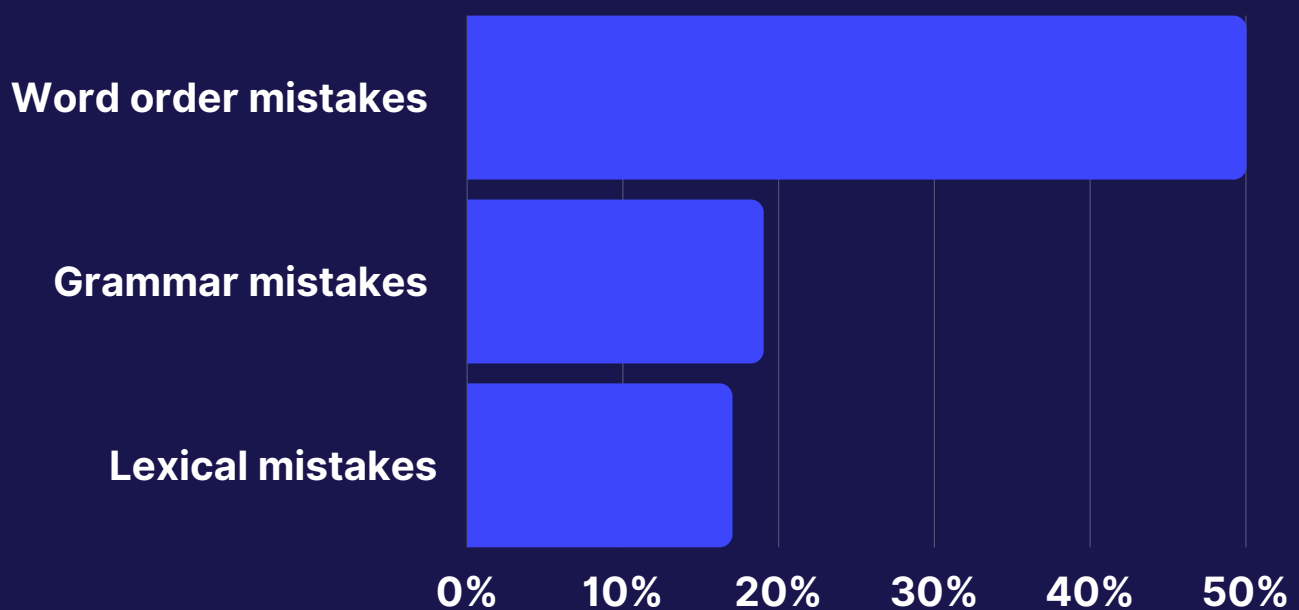
A person's profile is shown in silhouette, looking down at a laptop screen. The background is a blurred city skyline at dusk or dawn, with a warm orange and blue sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

2021: THE CURRENT STATE OF **MACHINE TRANSLATION**

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Today's tech is leaps and
bounds ahead of where it
was a decade ago.

REDUCTION OF MISTAKES BY NEURAL MACHINE TRANSLATION



Source: Free Code Camp

According to [Free Code Camp](#), neural translation, the most advanced type of machine translation, has reduced word order mistakes by 50%, lexical mistakes by 17%, and grammar mistakes by 19% (when compared with machine translation over the last two decades).

HOW IS NEURAL MACHINE TRANSLATION GOOD FOR YOUR ONLINE STORES?

QUICK MARKET FEEDBACK (TRAFFIC)

See which translated pages are getting visited right away without investing in human translation first

QUICK CONVERSIONS

Get instant feedback on products that sell best and for which markets

SPEED IN LAUNCHING

Launch your multilingual ecommerce website instantly

EDITION OF ACCURATE OUTPUT RATHER THAN TRANSLATING FROM ZERO

Focus editing/translating efforts in important areas of user experience, such as your checkout/ homepage/ best selling products

MACHINE TRANSLATION STRENGTHS FOR ECOMMERCE

There are many benefits of machine translation:

1. Evolved Tech

The tech has significantly improved over the last 10 years, making machine translation able to translate much like a human can – we can thank neural machine translation specifically for that.

2. Accurate results

While it can still handle advanced needs, machine translation produces the most seamless results for simple text in common languages. That means that if you have a site without complicated wording like product titles or descriptions, machine translation will handle most of it perfectly.

3. Budget-friendly

Modern machine translation is significantly cheaper than human translation. And even if you opt to use a human translator for the second leg of translation (and we think you should), you'll still pay less overall.

*"We take advantage of neural machine translation in our 37 languages and our global team makes quick fixes if needed. **It changed our way of working and we love it.**"*

ERIC ESPINOZA

PRODUCT MANAGER, IBM





THE ECOMMERCE WEBSITE TRANSLATION PROCESS

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE TRANSLATION

There are four main ways to translate a website, and different approaches can be used together for the best results. Let's get into each one so that you can decide the combination that's right for you.

1

RAW MACHINE TRANSLATION

Handling a Majority of Your Translations at Once

If you're running an ecommerce store with thousands of product pages that you want to translate into multiple languages, automated translation of the product descriptions is your best choice for getting started. It's the fastest way to get your content translated, and it's also far less costly than manual translation.

However, you shouldn't stop there. If you do, you could have some inaccurate or awkwardly-worded product descriptions on your site – and you may not even know they're there if you don't speak the language. Think of this as the first step to finalized translation.

POST-EDITING MACHINE TRANSLATION

Going Through Translations With a Fine-Tooth Comb

After you use machine translation to handle the majority of your ecommerce website's content, you'll have a human translator head in to read everything through, add nuances and make final corrections.

This means that a lot of the heavy lifting is done by machine translation first, leaving you (or whomever you hire) much less to do afterward.

COLLABORATIVE TRANSLATION, EDITING AND PROOFREADING

3

Working With a Translation Team to Fine-Tune the Copy

You're going to have to pull the team together at some point to fine-tune your translated copy. That may mean gathering multilingual team members or pairing up with a professional translator (or a combination of both strategies). There are a few steps to this process:

- **Decide who will take on what role.** While some team members may have similar skills, assigning roles ensures people won't overlap in their tasks and step on each other's toes. Most importantly, someone should be the project manager to ensure the project stays on track and is delivered on time.

- **Come up with a set of guidelines.** To stay consistent, you should have a brand glossary and style guide to refer to. This should be developed as much as possible ahead of time to avoid having to go through the copy to make changes after it's finalized.
- **Set a realistic timeline.** Get everybody on the same page regarding start and end dates for the project, plus when smaller deliverables are due. And make sure to take each person's work and personal schedule into consideration, especially if this is a side project for some people.
- **Communicate with the team regularly.** If you're not in an office setting together, real-time communication can be carried out using tools like Slack or Zoom.

4



TRANSCREATION

Translating the Essence of Language, Not Just Words

Remember at the beginning of this article when we talked about going beyond word-for-word translation to make copy appropriate, coherent, relevant, and effective in the target language?

That process is called “transcreation.” Transcreation, which combines the words “translation” and “creation,” is about salvaging the essence of the message even if the word-for-word translation isn’t exact. Advanced machine translation can handle some of this, but this is where a human translator is the most helpful and this applies to creative content.



CASE STUDY: FELT BICYCLES

HOW ONE COMPANY USED WEGLOT TO REACH NEW MARKETS

The challenge: Taking advantage of the 2020 bicycle sales boom to launch quickly

The performance-focused FELT Bicycles brand makes cutting-edge bikes for cyclocross, road, track and triathlon. When they were gearing up for their European launch (after the California-bred company had booming sales in the U.S.), they had to translate their Shopify ecommerce store into several languages: French, German, Italian and Spanish.

To translate their content, FELT opted for the Shopify-integrated Weglot translation app, which combines human and machine translation for quicker, more accurate, natural translation.

They used Weglot for first-layer translation, then relied on their own translation team to tweak the already-translated content so it was perfect for audiences.

That was the only way they'd be able to break into those markets.

The solution: Weglot's all in-one-solution with Machine translation and human edits

FELT also smartly segmented their copy into what could be left machine translated by the Weglot app and what they wanted to manually edit by a human.

Human-only translation was used for copy like blog posts, brand stories and product descriptions. Machine translation was kept for other areas of the site, like menus and sub-menus.

Overall, machine translation was used for about two-thirds of their website's content, handling an enormous segment of their copy.

FELT also used two different Weglot translations management features based on how they wanted to approach their translation workflow.

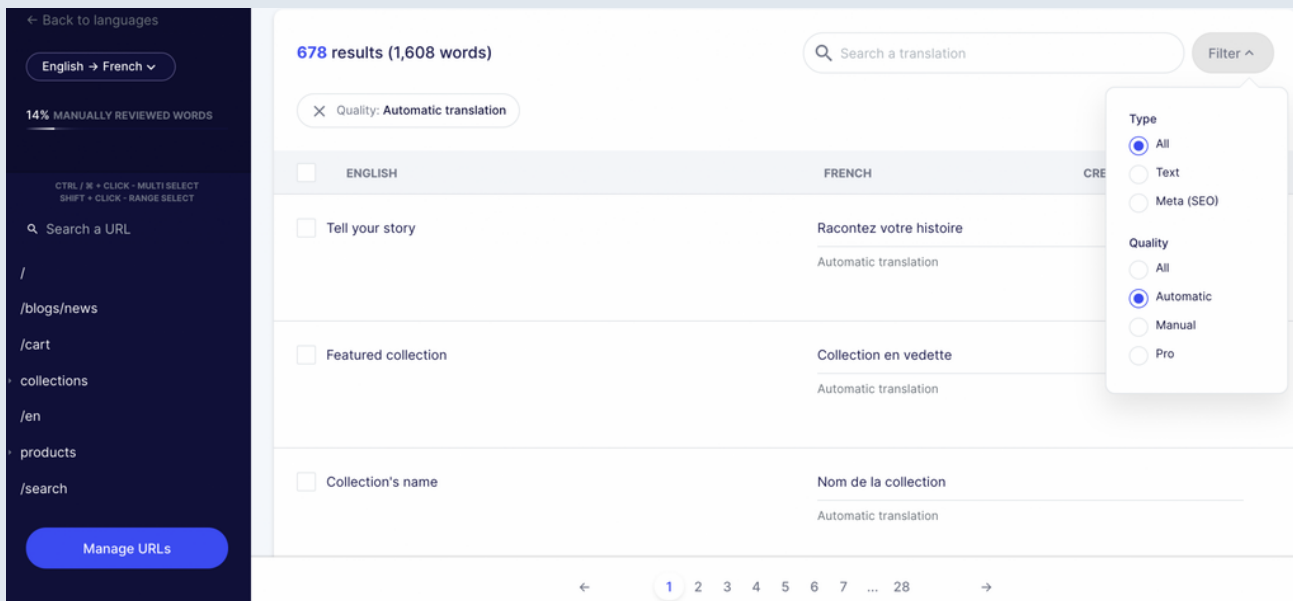
They started with the Weglot translations list to handle the bulk of their website translations.

Then, as new content was added that also needed to be translated, they relied on the visual editor for a nicer, more visual experience (that's best-suited to less-bulky translation needs).

Also, both editors – the list and the visual editor – have filters that let FELT look for auto-translations and their creation date.

That made it easy for the FELT team to find content that was already machine-translated and needed to be reviewed and edited by a human specialist.

The glossary tool proved helpful, too: FELT added biking-specific terms that they didn't ever want to translate, regardless of the language output. That way, they didn't have to go back in to manually change those industry terms.



FELT was able to easily launch in Europe and saw its largest conversions come out of Germany. The company also made a big impact in France post-translation and launch.

Plus, all of those international customers and potential customers were able to navigate the FELT website in their own language, which improved the customer experience tenfold.

Read more about how we worked with FELT [here](#).



BEST PRACTICES WHEN USING MACHINE TRANSLATION FOR YOUR ECOMMERCE WEBSITE

FIVE TIPS FOR AVOIDING COMMON TRANSLATION PITFALLS

Let's discuss five best practices to apply when using machine translation to bring your ecommerce website to international audiences.

DO YOUR RESEARCH FIRST

Machine translation works best for certain markets

Before you jump into machine translation, do your research. Where are your target markets? What languages do they speak? What is the English adoption there?

Keep in mind that Machine Translation is fed by large translated corpuses and the larger the quantity, the better the quality.

This means that you can expect better results from widely spoken languages such as Spanish, French or German but for a language like Icelandic, the results will not be so qualitative and since English adoption is wide in Iceland, it makes sense to not use Machine Translation for this market.

Knowing your markets well will make it easier to stay focused on your translation goals instead of wasting time translating into languages where Machine Translation won't be qualitative or have impact.

FIRST LAYER OF MACHINE TRANSLATION

No Need to Start From Scratch

Human translators can intervene after machine translation because they evaluate the quality of the output and either translate from zero, or clean up any problems, what we call post-editing. For example, idioms are particularly hard to translate, so a human is much better at accurately translating the intent of an idiom than a machine is. This is also an argument for why humans will never be fully replaced by machines – so long as there are nuanced language and brand-specific wording, human translators will be a necessity.

SPLIT YOUR ECOMMERCE WEBSITE INTO CONTENT TYPES

Get Organized to Make the Translation Process Smooth

Separate the content on your site into different types, such as product descriptions, checkout copy, policy pages and FAQ.

Product
Descriptions

Checkout
Copy

Policy
Pages

FAQ

This will make it easier to figure out what can be left to machine-translated first and what needs a human translator. **Here are a few tips for translating different types of website content:**

Raw machine translation

Apply raw machine translation to all of your support documents. Even if it requires a heavy hand during human translation, there's so much info in these types of documents that machine translation is a must-do as a first step. The same goes for menu and footer items and that don't need the attention of a human translator.

Support Content

Menu Items

Footer Items

Post-editing

Post-editing, apply machine translation to product titles and descriptions and your checkout but ensure that they remain SEO-optimized.

This is where having a human translator becomes most helpful — they can arrange translated words in a way that makes sense *and* is SEO-friendly.

Product titles

Product descriptions

Checkout

Professional translation

For the home page and marketing text, use a professional translation — you don't want to take any chances with those sections, and the text is limited, so it shouldn't cost too much for human translation.

Home Page

Marketing texts

QUALITY ASSURANCE BY A LOCAL REVIEWER

Have a Pro Review It All

One of the easiest ways to improve your translations is to have someone else take a look at them and edit as needed. It can be one of your internal team members that you invite to the project or a professional translator.

Do this even if you're proofreading and editing the copy yourself post-machine translation. Another pair of eyes can spot confusing statements, typos, and inconsistencies that you may miss.

Why not hire a translator or reviewer for **all of the content**?

Aside from the cost, you may not get the results you're after, especially when it comes to productivity.


First, human translators will take weeks or even months to finalize all translations, and their output will need to be reviewed just like that of machine translation.

Plus, recent studies have shown that editing after the first layer of machine translation resulted in 36% higher productivity than having a human translate all of the text from scratch so machine translation can prove to be a real benefit in terms of budget and efficiency.

CONSISTENCY

Maintain Consistency in Any and All Languages

There are many ways to go about translation, but it's crucial to choose one and stick with it. Our recommended approach is to split the content by sensitivity and use the first-layer translation for the least sensitive one, then have a specialist manually update the copy for the most-sensitive one (either an internal reviewer or a professional translator).



THE FUTURE OF MACHINE TRANSLATION

TRANSLATION ENGINES TO PAY ATTENTION TO

There are a number of machine translation engines that ecommerce website owners can explore. Let's get into a few.

DEEPL

DeepL is a leader in machine translation because it feeds its tech with one of the largest textbases you'll find – and you can thank Linguee for that, a translation-like tool by the same makers. (Linguee isn't exactly a traditional translation tool; instead, it only offers translations for words or phrases, not long texts.) DeepL also has a development team that's constantly improving the neural network – i.e., making the database larger and the translations more natural.

GOOGLE TRANSLATE

Google Translate, the tool that most people think of when they hear the term “machine translation,” has used SMT since its start, though it's becoming more NMT-focused. Google Translate is imperfect, especially when it comes to lengthy text, but its machine learning is always improving.

Why? The SMT database is often improved and enhanced with updated and more reliable human translations. It also pays to note that Google Translate has more language pairs than DeepL, even if the text corpus that's accessed is roughly on the same level. Another tool similar to Google Translate is Microsoft's Bing Translator tool – however, it sets a new standard for high-quality machine translation using solely the NMT model.

AMAZON TRANSLATE

As can be expected, Amazon is also dipping its toes in the machine translation world. Their Amazon Translate tool uses NMT to localize mobile and web content so that you can reach international users. One of the tool's standout features is the ability to use Custom Terminology to set specific brand or industry terms, like brand or model names. And according to a report from Intento, Amazon was the leading machine translation provider when compared to 14 other providers.

MORE MACHINE TRANSLATION TECH

WEARABLES, TAPPABLE TRANSLATIONS AND MORE

As multilingualism becomes accessible to more and more people, it's becoming more convenient to access, too. One market that's being tapped into is wearables.

The Pilot earpiece from Waverly Labs is a good example of this – it listens to the conversation the wearer is hearing and then translates into the language of choice.

Google's another company that's making translation tools available to the general public. Their Tap to Translate function on Android phones is a perfect example of this.

The feature was released in 2016, allowing users to translate in-the-moment as they receive text messages. Google also has a visual translation tool.

For example, if you want to translate text on a hard copy brochure, you would use the tool by hovering your phone over the item, and then it would translate the copy for you into your language of choice.

CUSTOMIZING MACHINE TRANSLATION ENGINES



FINDING THE TRANSLATION METHOD THAT WORKS FOR YOU

Whatever your reason to translate your web copy, there's an efficient and reliable way to do it: advanced machine translation.

This means the engine instead of being trained with general corpuses is trained with your content and terminology only, making it more and more accurate for your industry specific content.

Machine translation has come a long way and has gotten more customizable, and it's far beyond its rudimentary beginnings. Instead of basic word-for-word translations, modern tools take context and natural speaking into account as well as retail-specific terminologies, making for much more realistic translations.

At Weglot, we use groundbreaking, neural-based machine translation tech to translate your website so you can reach foreign audiences and expand your brand. We combine leading services, like Bing Translator, DeepL and Google Translate, and allow you to customize your terminologies in an automated way and to easily edit your translations so you have complete control over the quality at all times.

Machine translation isn't 100% perfect – but it's getting pretty close, and combined with a detailed human eye, your ecommerce website's translations can be close to error-free.

Some brands rely on machine translation only, which can help improve website conversions, but copy accuracy is lower, which can impede the user experience and potentially have a negative impact on conversions and brand reputation.

Thousands of big brands like Volcom, Groupe Rossignol, or Steve Madden choose to handle human proofreading, editing, and fine-tuning of their translations after a first layer of machine translation through our solution.

At Weglot, we feel that strikes the perfect balance: Machine translation can speed up the process of translation and handle the brunt of the text to be translated.

SUMMARY

Machine Translation will benefit your international marketing efforts with:

1

Neural technology with increasingly accurate results

2

Faster launches with immediate market feedback (quick ROI)

3

Content that's customizable on-the-go with internal reviewers & professionals

4

Customizable results with your terminology and your professionally translated content

Who are we?

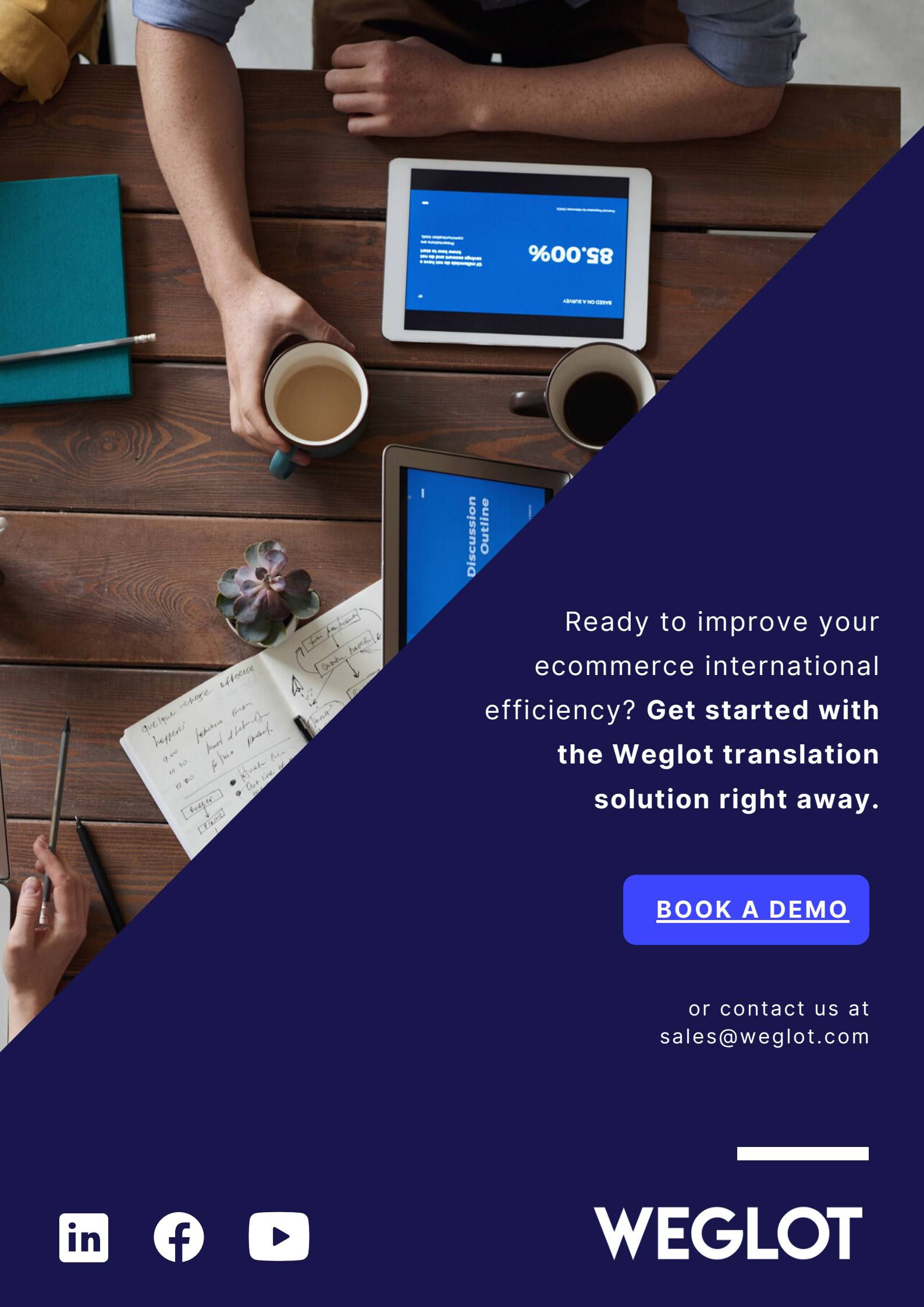
Weglot is a no-code website localization solution that allows you to launch a multilingual ecommerce store instantly. We both translate and display the content of your website removing the pain of having to manage multiple websites for multiple markets.

Manage the translation of your ecommerce website translation project in days not months with a first layer of machine translation for speed and automation, then use our post-editing features to control the quality of your translations.

Easily collaborate with teammates, order professional translators from the Weglot Dashboard or add your own translator.

WEGLOT





Ready to improve your
ecommerce international
efficiency? **Get started with
the Weglot translation
solution right away.**

[BOOK A DEMO](#)

or contact us at
sales@weglot.com



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