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## U.S. workers seek career change in comedy

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By Eddie Vega

NEW YORK (Reuters) - As he takes the stage at the Comic Strip, Paul Mecurio gauges the laughter from the previous acts and adjusts his material to fit the mood, using a skill he honed as a corporate attorney.

"When you have only three teeth in your skull, they should be the cleanest three teeth in the country. But not this guy. One tooth was cracked. One was brown. The third had braces," he says, starting a gag about a salesman.

Mecurio made \$250,000 a year in a steady Wall Street job. He said he left that life because as a stand-up comedian he can speak his mind on any subject at any volume.

Mecurio, with two Emmy awards for his work on "The Daily Show," is among the growing ranks of Americans turning to comedy for a more satisfying career or extra cash, says Tom Sobel, president of TSM Artists, an agency that books comics.

Aspiring comics are enjoying strong demand. The number of U.S. comedy clubs has boomed, with about 75 opening nationally in the last three years. As well as more than 200 comedy spots, cruise lines, ski resorts, bars, colleges and corporations seek comedians for comedy nights and parties.

Would-be comics can earn \$20,000 to \$500,000 a year, even without being a household names, experts say. Mega-stars can earn as much as six figures in one night.

Angie McMahon, 30, of Chicago, started attending improvisational comedy workshops to meet new people. "It's not like going to a gym where people don't talk to you," she says.

Now a member of improv group Chemically Imbalanced, she earns about \$20,000 a year, about what she made as a receptionist, but more fun, she says. "Office work is boring."

Comedy troupe Second City has seen a surge in new students in recent years, says Rob Chambers, its director of training centers. Second City centers in Las Vegas, Toronto, Detroit and New York are working to capacity and the one in Los Angeles has moved to a larger location to accommodate the increase.

"Everyone, either in the front of their minds or the back of it, wants to do comedy professionally," says Chambers.

### CORPORATE MARKET

A successful comedian has many of the attributes that are essential to climbing the corporate ladder — ease with speaking in public, strong interpersonal skills and intuitive knowledge of how to put an audience at ease with a laugh.

Companies are incorporating comedy into training.

"There is a huge corporate market for our workshops because they help break down social barriers and open up lines of communication. That's something any boss would appreciate," said Chambers of Second City.

While abandoning a safe job for open mike nights may seem risky, a background in comedy has advantages.

Career counselor Shelly McDonald, 35, of the Kansas Department of Commerce, said comedy teaches the most critical marketing skill: Knowing your market. And there are other business advantages to being funny.

"Everybody loves to laugh," McDonald says, "The best public speakers are able to hold the attention of